Marxism Today

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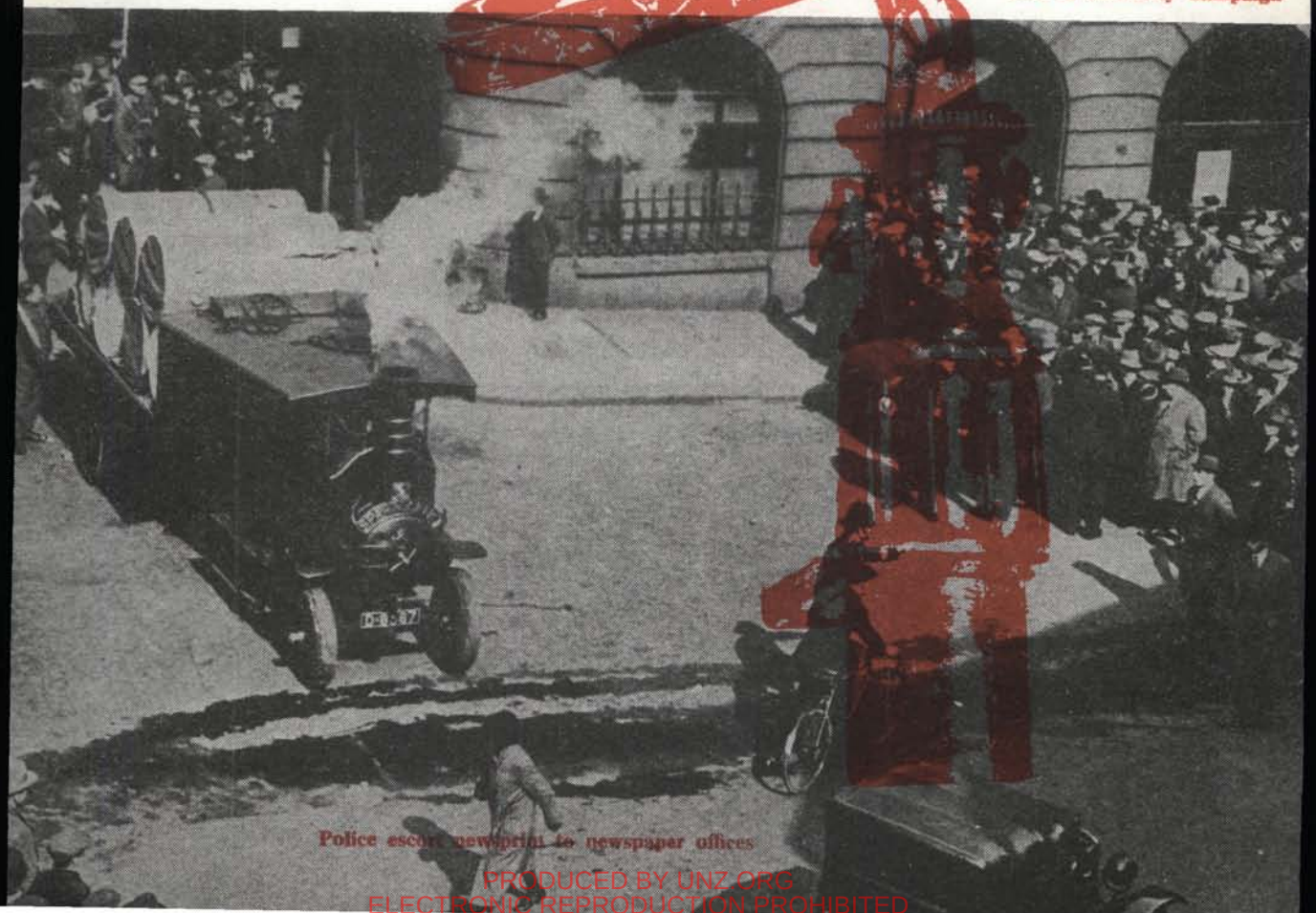
John Foster — The State and Ruling Class during the General Strike

Mick Jenkins — The Councils of Action as a Form of Struggle

Jack Cohen — Marxism versus Reformism in the General Strike

George Short — The Miners Fight On

Miniature miner's lamp
Sold in Solidarity Campaign



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Marxism Today

Theoretical and Discussion Journal of the Communist Party

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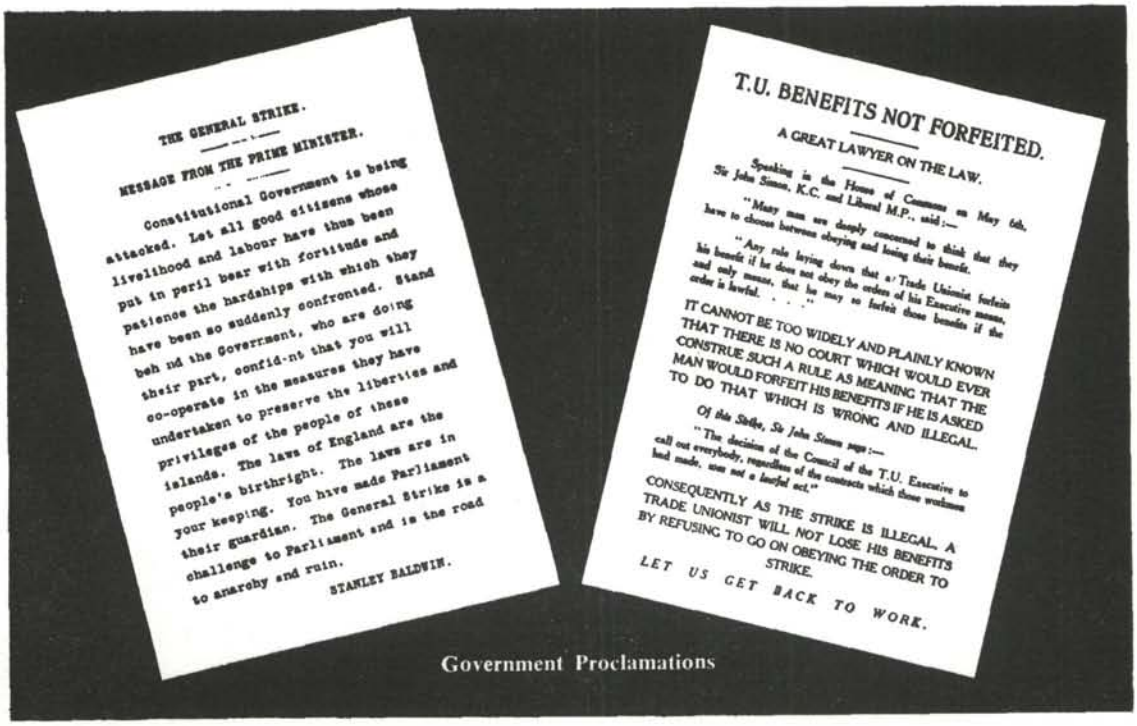
THE GENERAL STRIKE.
MESSAGE FROM THE PRIME MINISTER.
Constitutional Government is being attacked. Let all good citizens whose livelihood and labour have thus been put in peril bear with fortitude and patience the hardships with which they have been so suddenly confronted. Stand beh nd the Government, who are doing their part, confid-nt that you will co-operate in the measures they have undertaken to preserve the liberties and privileges of the people of these islands. The laws of England are the people's birthright. The laws are in your keeping. You have made Parliament their guardian. The General Strike is a challenge to Parliament and is the road to anarchy and ruin.
STANLEY BALDWIN.
T.U. BENEFITS NOT FORFEITED.
A GREAT LAWYER ON THE LAW.
Speaking in the House of Commons on May 6th, Sir John Simon, K.C. and Liberal M.P., said:—
"Many men are deeply concerned to think that they have to choose between obeying and losing their benefit.
"Any rule laying down that a Trade Unionist forfeits his benefit if he does not obey the orders of his Executive means, and only means, that he may so forfeit those benefits if the order is lawful. . . ."
IT CANNOT BE TOO WIDELY AND PLAINLY KNOWN THAT THERE IS NO COURT WHICH WOULD EVER CONSTRUE SUCH A RULE AS MEANING THAT THE MAN WOULD FORFEIT HIS BENEFITS IF HE IS ASKED TO DO THAT WHICH IS WRONG AND ILLEGAL.
Of the Strike, Sir John Simon says:—
"The decision of the Council of the T.U. Executive to call out everybody, regardless of the contracts which those workmen had made, was not a lawful act."
CONSEQUENTLY AS THE STRIKE IS ILLEGAL, A TRADE UNIONIST WILL NOT LOSE HIS BENEFITS BY REFUSING TO GO ON OBEYING THE ORDER TO STRIKE.
LET US GET BACK TO WORK.
Government Proclamations

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The State and Ruling Class during the General Strike

John Foster

(The author is Lecturer in Politics at Strathclyde University, Glasgow, and author of a study of early forms of working-class consciousness in England.)

Towards evening on May 7, 1926 a small convoy of anonymous black motor vans drove out from London towards the Buckinghamshire countryside. When the convoy neared High Wycombe, the vans separated and started depositing anxious-looking men in neat black suits outside the premises of chair manufacturers. No, they explained, they did not want to buy chairs. Just the legs. And they would pay cash. Somewhat furtively, bundles of chair-legs were then hurried out into the vans, the convoy reformed and was soon on its way back to London.

The chair-legs, several thousand of them, ended up in Whitehall, and the following day (after being crudely refashioned into truncheons) were being put to active use against working people across the whole of South East England.

This incident (recorded with some pride by the civil servant responsible) occurred four days *after* the beginning of the General Strike, and poses enough questions to be a useful starting point for examining the role of the state during that struggle.[1]

A Government Miscalculation

First of all, why was it necessary for the government to take such bizarre steps to supplement its supply of truncheons—especially when it had spent most of the previous nine months preparing for the confrontation?

The short answer is that it had underestimated the working class response and been caught out. Prepare it certainly had. But the great bulk of its meticulous arrangements had been designed to maintain supplies of food and fuel. The government had calculated that, if it could solve this problem, victory would already be within its grasp. The strike was likely to be ragged and incomplete—especially in the badly unionised south—and would collapse quickly facing the success of the government's arrangements. Any physical trial of strength would be avoided and, given the moderate leadership of the TUC, such a confrontation was unlikely to come from the trade union side.

In fact the reverse happened. Despite all the efforts of the TUC General Council—in particular its decision to play straight into the government's hands by calling out only transport and service workers in the first instance—the working class was not just massive but militant. The prior work of the Communist Party and the Left had paid off. The Trades Councils quickly transformed themselves into centres of class mobilisation and were able to use the weight of the local movement—especially as mass pickets—to frustrate the government's supply arrangements. The existing police forces, even when supplemented by the special constabulary, found it impossible to cope. In the South East mass pickets effectively isolated the vital Thameshaven petrol depot and by the second day were seriously hampering food distribution. Buses had been driven off the streets of all but the very centre of London.

Why the Territorials?

By May 7 the situation was so serious that Baldwin, the Prime Minister, finally agreed to a step he had previously resisted: calling out the Territorial Army. However, in doing so he laid down an important condition. It should operate purely as a civilian force, in the form of the specially constituted Civil Constabulary Reserve, and its members should be dressed as special constables and not as soldiers.[2] Thus the urgent need for more truncheons and the answer to our initial question.

Yet, like all simple questions, it conceals a whole series of others. Surely, it might be objected, the government had plenty of ready manpower without calling up the Territorials. It had concentrated something like 40,000 soldiers around London and held another 12,000 in reserve on Salisbury Plain. The ports and esturies were choked with naval craft and the list of ships allocated to 'emergency duties' reads like a roll call of the navy: in all 61 destroyers and submarines and 14 battleships and cruisers. Why, then, was it necessary to use the Territorial

[1] Public Record Office (PRO) MEPOL 5/135.

[2] PRO CAB 23/52, May 7, 1926.

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Army? Why, above all, should it be disguised as a civilian force and sent out with chair-legs instead of rifles?

For an explanation at this level it is necessary to stand back for a moment and review the whole range of problems facing the British ruling class in the 1920s (as well as remembering that the capitalist state is much more than just an instrument of force and intimidation).

Ruling Class Strategy after World War I

Economically, British imperialism had suffered a serious reverse as a result of the 1914-18 war. Although on the defensive industrially before the war—its technology was already a victim of high capital export—the country continued to control world banking and finance. Profits from this source probably came near a third of all capital income in 1914 and the flow of loans and credit through London played a vital role in continued overseas demand for British goods.

The pressures of war broke this carefully balanced mechanism. The pound was effectively driven off the gold standard, the country became a debtor to the United States and by the end of the war London was no longer able to make the loans (or attract the deposits) which were so essential not just to maintain its banking pre-eminence but to provide the overseas demand for British industry.

In these circumstances it was not unnatural that a return to the gold standard was seen as the major strategic objective. Without gold, much of British industry, so heavily dependent on the pre-war pattern of capital export, would face bankruptcy. Equally, without gold, British bankers—for so long reliant on a now outmoded form of usury imperialism and with only a very imperfectly developed base in monopoly industry—would find themselves cut off from their overseas superprofits.

But how was it to be done? If foreign confidence was to be restored, the balance of payments and the depreciation of sterling had to be corrected first. Yet how could this be achieved if British industry was already technologically behind its competitors? In normal circumstances there was perhaps an obvious answer to cut wages. But even this was no longer possible in the way it had been before the war. Indeed, Labour was now so powerfully organised that wage-cutting had become positively dangerous, and this brings us to the other side of the dilemma facing the ruling class: its loss of political control.

Transformation in Attitudes

It would be an exaggeration to claim that the First World War saw the emergence of mass socialist consciousness in Britain. But it did undoubtedly witness an irrevocable transformation in attitudes and social organisation.

Thinking back from today it is often difficult to grasp the strange situation that existed before 1914. At that time less than one worker in five belonged to a trade union, and the majority of these were drawn from the better-paid (and often socially conservative) skilled crafts. Union membership tended to be seen as a badge of social superiority and carried with it a narrowly sectional view of a trade union's function. Most workers, whether union members or not, still voted Liberal or Tory and although a Labour Party had been formed in 1900 it depended for its parliamentary seats on Liberal support. Indeed, most union leaderships (often even more conservative than their members) had only been persuaded to give formal support to the Labour Party by the legal threat to trade union funds posed by the 1901 Taff Vale decision.

Why was it that the movement was so backward in Britain? Certainly not—as some have suggested—because of British national character. Rather, as Lenin argued, it was the temporary product of particular phase in the development of British capitalism, and derived from a decision by the ruling class to use the profits of empire to create a privileged social stratum, a Labour Aristocracy, at a time when industrial workers had just started to move into fairly sustained political opposition to the existing order. It had been in response to this, embodied in the intensifying class struggles of the 1830s and 40s, that a fairly radical (and very successful) change of tactics had been adopted.

Labour Aristocracy under Fire

Instead of continuing a policy of blanket opposition to virtually any independent working class organisation, it had been decided to permit and then actually encourage simple, moderate 'non-violent' trade union organisation—at that time the preserve of those skilled workers whose position in the labour market was sufficiently strong to enable them to bargain without using extra-legal tactics. As a result, the best organised contingents of the working class, the cotton spinners and miners who in the previous quasi-illegal conditions had been the most reliable fighters on behalf of all workers in a given industry, now began to move away into sectional isolation and to use their strength solely for their own economic advancement, against, not for, the class as a whole. The class was divided. Radical leaders were replaced by 'non-political' trade union bosses, governments handed out a long succession of perks and minor concessions and for half a century the trade union organisation of the unionised minority served very successfully to perpetuate the authority of the ruling class.

In fact even before 1914 the dominance of this Labour Aristocracy was coming under fire, but it

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was undoubtedly the war which finally broke its hold and so precipitated a political challenge which the ruling class had not experienced for two generations.

War hit at all its most vulnerable points. First, it brought something hitherto unknown in Britain, near full employment, and so created the conditions for the unionisation of all grades of workers. By 1920 union membership had jumped from 4 to 8 million and transformed the movement's internal balance in favour of non-skilled occupations. The base was laid for a new industrial unionism. Second, the pressure of wartime munitions production did irreparable damage to the industrial grip of the right wing. War production not just demanded a massive assault on the privileged position of skilled workers in engineering, but meant that the government had to lean so heavily on the right-wing union bosses that it finally broke their hold on the shop-floor.

In a situation where workers now enjoyed a uniquely strong bargaining position and where union leaderships were so committed to the war effort that they eventually agreed to a legal ban on strike action, it was inevitable that workers would turn to unofficial leaders and illegal methods. A radically new shop stewards movement sprang into being, often with openly socialist leaders and taking 'direct action' to remedy grievances. Previously isolated anti-war socialists like Gallacher, McManus, Bell and Pollitt became mass leaders overnight.

Finally, and quite as important, there were the war's effects on the wider working class community: food shortages, inflation, totally inadequate pensions and the slaughter and mutilation of a whole generation. Probably in isolation and without the changes that had taken place in industry, the political effects of this would have been limited.

But coming at a time when the trade unions were being transformed into mass organisations, when the shop floor was becoming the basis of effective action and when leadership was being taken over by the unofficial movement, it inevitably meant that the industrial strength of labour (and as part of this the previously somewhat dormant trades councils) would be drawn into the fight. What is more, in wartime conditions any effective action on this front—on issues like conscription, pensions, rents—involved a clear challenge to (and often prolonged conflict with) the capitalist state.

It seems to have been largely in the course of these struggles that the old political allegiances gave way to the beginnings of a new mass working class base for the Labour Party. Admittedly, this new allegiance was still very fluid and diffuse, but it must already have been clear in 1918 that it would give the Labour Party a quite different weight and political direction to that which it took from the old aristocratic unions before the war.

Effect of Russian Revolution

This, then, was the challenge which now faced the ruling class and which made it so difficult to cut wages in the old way. It was, however, made still worse by two further factors.

The first was the reality of successful socialist revolution in Russia. More than anything it was this that gave the confused, isolated but also often extra-legal and direct action struggles of the war period a sharply new political significance. From being simply a makeshift response to attack they now started to be seen as part of that same process —if only a very small beginning—by which working people in Russia had taken matters into their own hands and set up their own state.

Both for the establishment and the more advanced sections of the working class such 'direct action' came to signify a new and revolutionary definition of socialism—a definition quite remote from the syndicalist or state socialist trends of pre-war British socialism and which was soon to be given organisational expression by the formation of a Communist Party in 1920.

Structure of the Labour Party

The second and interlocking threat derived from the dangerously democratic structure of the Labour Party. Locally the Labour parties were still directly based in the trades councils (or trades and labour councils as they were then), and took their political direction from the delegates of affiliated unions. Although nationally things were more complicated (and the new 1918 constitution provided for a new 'individual' category of members), this local structure meant that the Party was as yet organically far more closely linked to the class and capable of very speedy response to changes in the level of struggle.

When, for instance, in 1920 the trades and labour councils constituted themselves as Councils for Action to stop British intervention in Russia, a near majority adopted the demands and slogans of the newly formed Communist Party in preference to those of the right-wing dominated Parliamentary Labour Party.[3] In such a situation, when bans and proscriptions were unknown and the Labour Party still directly what its name suggested, the party of organised labour, any hasty attack on the movement might easily spell the beginning of the end for the capitalist order in Britain.

Two Rival 'Solutions'

So what was the answer? Put crudely two rival solutions emerged. One was to tackle Labour head-

[3] Labour Party Library, CA CON and CA GEN. Fuller details of this source and those used in much of the subsequent argument can be found in J. Skelley (ed), *The General Strike 1926* (Lawrence and Wishart 1976).

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on: to defeat it while it remained a minority party, discredit its leaders, attack its trade union base, decisively reassert the class values of the existing order—and then recrystallise political loyalties in the old pattern of Liberal and Tory. This was the answer to people like Churchill—then just recovering from an unsuccessful attempt to 'strangle Bolshevism at birth' in Russia.

The other solution was more ambitious. It involved recapturing and then developing the Labour Party itself as a potential weapon of the establishment. Obviously, this could not be done in the old pre-1914 way. With the whole battery of bribes and controls that went under the name 'Labour Aristocracy' now in disarray (and likely to become still more ineffective as a result of the massive unemployment which skilled workers were to suffer in the post-war period) control of the Labour Party could no longer be regarded simply as an additional bonus that stemmed from a socially subservient upper stratum of the labour force.

If anything, the approach would have to be the other way about. It would now be the Labour Party itself which would have to act as the basic anchor. By adopting the Labour Party as a legitimate governing party and regrouping the sizeable number of right-wingers who still held positions of leadership in the party and the unions—and with whom a degree of personal understanding had been developed before and during the war—these organisations might themselves be transformed into the primary institutions of control: reacting back on their membership and remoulding ('constitutionalising') the ideas of the great mass of working people who had now been brought within the orbit of the Labour Movement for the first time.

This at any rate seems to have been the basic idea, and it was ultimately this second perspective of 'educating Labour'—as it was aptly described by its main protagonist, Baldwin—that was put into practice.

As a strategy, even remembering the traditional guile of the British establishment, it may seem a somewhat surprising choice. It did undoubtedly involve certain risks. Given the institutional links between the Labour Party and a now mass Labour Movement, the whole arrangement could easily boomerang. While it might work in the early stages, as soon as the government started to use it to bring down wages to the level needed to sustain the gold standard, there was no guarantee that the right-wing would not again lose control (and indeed this is what did happen to a degree at the time of Red Friday in 1925 when the TUC was forced to back the miners against threatened wage cuts).

To this extent, therefore, the adoption of the Baldwin strategy does require some explanation, and, though we have only very sketchy information on this, one or two points do need to be made about the rather special relationship between the state and the ruling class which was emerging in Britain during the 1920s.

State and Ruling Class in the 1920s

It would certainly be wrong to describe this as simply a stage in the subordination of the state to the interests of monopoly. For one thing, unlike Germany and America, industrial monopoly only started to develop significantly in Britain during the First World War—while its merger with banking capital was not to be fully consumated till considerably later. Yet it would also be misleading to present the British state in this period as still basically the state of the capitalist class as a whole.

Already for over half a century the representatives of banking capital, of the merchant banks who manipulated the great outflow of capital export, had exercised a virtual stranglehold over the country's economic and foreign policy. Already by the end of the 19th century there had been a substantial erosion of the sovereignty of parliament, the traditional institution of the capitalist class as a whole in which propertied interests had been represented roughly in proportion to their economic weight. The enhanced political authority of the cabinet, the institution of a cabinet committee system, the growth of centralised national party machines, the creation of a professional elite civil service and the dominance of a Bank of England-oriented Treasury were all developments of the later 19th century. What is more, in the realm of practical politics none of the challenges made by the representatives of industrial capital in the years up to 1914—particularly on the issues of tariffs and protection—had gained anything more than very insignificant second prizes, a fact that is all the more surprising when one remembers that it was the local employers, and not the London bankers, who still retained a predominant ideological influence in the constituencies and were the immediate local patrons of the Labour Aristocracy.

What, then, was the situation after the war? In the constituencies, as we have seen, industrial capital had by then largely lost its wider political base, and the Liberals (after first merging with the Tories in the wartime coalition) had by 1922 suffered decisive electoral eclipse. Economically, the artificial conditions of war had at first produced a rapid development of industrial monopoly and concentration but this had been as quickly halted by the deflation of 1920 which sent large slabs of heavy industry collapsing into the hands of the bankers (who at that time were more interested in extracting their over-ambitious wartime investments than in using the opportunity to consolidate control).

Yet despite these changes (which probably dis-

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"Strategy: Offensive" (From a sequence of pictures on the General Strike by Andrew Turner to be published by Journeyman Press)

The twelve Communists arrested in October 1926

The Government attacks

Gasoline wagon escorted by mounted police along St. Georges Road, Southwark, on second day of strike

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oriented contemporary politicians as much as anyone) a good deal remained. Despite its failure to develop a significant base in monopoly industry, banking capital was still dominant, and still profoundly distrustful of the potentially protectionist ambitions of domestic industry. The inner core of the governing establishment had hardly changed at all, and it was of course these men who previously cemented relationships between the urbane economic imperialism of the London bankers and the party politicians. As senior officials in the Bank of England, permanent secretaries in the civil service, newspaper editors (particularly *The Times*), senior academics, lawyers and churchmen (still much valued for their knowledge of popular attitudes), they had been relied upon to create a climate of governing opinion in which it was possible to discount the often rather dangerous demagogy—whether stemming from Chamberlain and Carson or Lloyd George and Churchill—which had been used to mobilise support in the constituencies. Now, in the 1920s, it was these men who had the responsibility for deciding how to respond to the problems posed by Labour's new mass influence.

The Baldwin Strategy

Not surprisingly Churchill's solution (it was of course shared by a number of other politicians) did not find a very ready response, and was anyway historically somewhat out of place. His rhetoric was decisively that of class mobilisation. It starkly posed the need to prepare for a revolutionary threat and called for the active organisation of the bourgeoisie in its own defence. But what bourgeoisie?

Churchill's points of reference swung erratically from the Tory radicalism of a previous generation to the activities of Signor Mussolini in Italy. While such attitudes undoubtedly found some response among the newly isolated and frightened employers in the provinces, they hardly corresponded to the historical realities of Britain in the 1920s. The mandarins of Whitehall could not but view with distrust any recreation of the organisations of a 'capitalist class as a whole'—while the situation hardly merited a jump forward to outright fascism. Although the local establishment might have lost some influence, there was no wholesale loss of nerve, no need for British banking capital to anticipate a solution later attempted by monopoly capital in Germany: to redevelop a mass base through the demagogic but carefully controlled and authoritarian mobilisation of the petty bourgeoisie.

Far better to see what could be done with those Labour parliamentarians, men like J. H. Thomas, Ramsay MacDonald and Arnold Henderson, with whom the governing establishment had already developed such close and useful relations. Even before 1914 (when the local social stratum base of the Labour Aristocracy was already beginning to crumble) considerable experience had been gained at 'boxing in' labour leaders; compelling retreat in compromising circumstances—and then relying on them to sell what were effectively the politics of class demobilisation to their members. Could not the same technique be used now—merely on a bigger scale? Moreover, if successful, the development of a constitutionalised Labour Party would have the additional advantage of providing the banking establishment with political allies in the constituencies who were not directly reliant on industrial capital.

It seems to have been such considerations that eventually led to the adoption of the Baldwin strategy. But at the same time it should be remembered—and this is crucial to any understanding of the general strike—that even the champions of this line did not see it as totally guaranteed (as Baldwin put it in 1927 'democracy has arrived at a gallop in England and I feel all the time it is a race for life. Can we educate them before the crash comes?') and that part of this 'race for life' was to win *all* those loyal to the capitalist order for what would have been called a more 'intelligent' attitude to the Labour Party.[4]

'Constitutionalising' Labour

This need to win the class as a whole is a central point both practically and theoretically.

For although it is important to maintain a clear distinction between the state and the ruling class—to remember their relative autonomy—it is also important to remember that the two are also relatively interconnected: that the adoption by the state of a new strategy of political control will depend on the development of parallel and supporting forms of social relationship by the class; that far from being distinct and insulated the spheres of what are sometimes called political and civil society must—to be effective—interpenetrate and, if they change, do so in sequence. Indeed, in examining the origins of particular strategies, one generally finds fairly acute struggle between different segments of the ruling class to ensure that the strategy adopted does in fact fit in with their own domestic arrangements. In Russia, for example, it was precisely the conflict over the adoption of political forms suiting the rival needs of employer liberalism and landlord autocracy which made possible a revolutionary intervention by the organised working class in 1905.

On a lesser scale the same issues were involved in Britain in the 1920s. For the local employers in 1924 the installation of a minority Labour government—and the parallel arrival of Labour in local government—must have appeared to pose a whole number

[4] G. Young, *Baldwin* (London 1952).

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of threats to their class authority. The town and county councils, for instance, which they had long regarded almost as their own property, which controlled their industrial infrastructure and in some cases dominated the local labour market, now threatened to pass into the hands of the very trade unionists with whom they had to bargain on wages. Worse still, were the effects on those groups on which they had previously relied to maintain their influence among the general population, and which, if the job of 'constitutionalising' Labour was to be carried through, had to undergo a fairly major switch in local orientation.

Two groups were probably particularly important. There was the highly organised Catholic Irish voting machine previously committed to the Liberal sponsors of home rule and now in many areas throwing its weight—with crucial effect—behind the right-wing in the Labour Party. At a more diffuse level there were the previously subservient white collar sections such as school teachers, administrators and even clerics. These were now emboldened by Labour's newly conferred respectability to identify with that party their basically Fabian aspirations for state intervention and, in doing so, provide a crucial ideological counter at local level to any 'anti-constitutional' ideas generated in the course of individual struggle.

Not surprisingly, therefore, many local employers began to feel that the national establishment—especially in quite unnecessarily giving power to Labour in 1924—was conspiring to destroy the very foundations of their existence. Yet, if the Baldwin strategy was to succeed, it was essential not just that such changes should take place but that local employers should not in reaction stoke up the class content of local politics by forming anti-socialist coalitions or, still worse, class-based paramilitary or fascist organisations.

This was why carrying through the new policy was so tricky. Up to Red Friday (July 1925) the emphasis was mainly on persuasion. Some elements of coercion were of course essential. Merely to maintain the credibility of the right-wing labour leaders and give them valid excuses for retreat, it was important to be able to produce situations—like that which led to Black Friday, the betrayal of the miners, in 1921—where Labour appeared to be outgunned by government anti-strike preparations.

Labour's 'Education'

But the purpose of such preparations was not to destroy the Labour Movement. On the contrary, it was to create opportunities for its 'education'; an education to be carried out by the right wing themselves and by way of Labour's own institutions and newspapers although within a larger context—of 'public opinion' and the creation of 'constitutional' political opportunities and alliances—that was firmly orchestrated by the establishment.

At each stage in this process Labour's leadership would be nudged a little further towards disowning unconstitutional action—dissociating itself from the 'violent and dictatorial' methods of revolutionary socialism. And conversely as the arguments of the right-wing progressively confused and demobilised the mass of trade union members—slowly obscured the lessons of 1917 and 1920—so the Right's room for manoeuvre was further increased and it became still easier to use administrative methods to isolate the Marxist Left.

Such was the basic policy up to Red Friday and until the spring of 1925 it looked only too successful. Despite one or two danger signals (like the establishment of the TUC-backed Anglo-Soviet Trade Union Committee in 1924-5), the Labour Party appeared to have settled down to its constitutional role as his majesty's opposition. Soon after succeeding Ramsay MacDonald as Prime Minister in 1925 Baldwin delivered what was tantamount to a victory speech. Announcing his opposition to any legal restriction on the Labour Party's political levy, he committed his government to work for 'peace in the country between all classes . . . there are many in all ranks and all parties who re-echo my prayer: "Give peace in our time, O Lord".'

Bluff Called

Unfortunately for him this prayer was not answered. As a result of the new onslaught on wages demanded by the return to the gold standard in April 1925 (and the ability of the Communist Party to regroup left-wing forces in the movement), the TUC General Council found itself forced to back the miners against further reductions in wages in July 1925. Baldwin was caught with his anti-strike preparations out of gear, bluffed, found his bluff called and was then forced into granting a subsidy to maintain mining wages for the next nine months. For him and the line he represented it was very near to total disaster.

Nonetheless Baldwin held on. Though there was strong discontent among the Tory rank and file (and an attempt at revolt in the Cabinet), he retained the support of the Whitehall establishment. Naturally, if the damage done to Labour's 'education' was to be repaired, the coercive side of the strategy now had to become far more prominent. But the basic line remained. The Labour Movement was to be re-educated not destroyed, and unless this is remembered there can be no understanding of government tactics in the general strike.

When the subsidy expired in April 1926 and the TUC came out in solidarity with the locked-out miners, the issue on which the government decided to fight was not the level of wages. Nor was it, as

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Churchill would probably have made it, that of class power, to rally the nation against Bolshevism. It was simply over the issue of using extra-constitutional action to influence government policy. It was to be a police operation, a defence of the neutral state and not an intervention by the state on behalf of the mineowners. Any class rhetoric was to be avoided. Nothing must be done to embitter feelings. If possible the army was to be kept out of sight, and, if used, only sparingly. Hence it was, to answer our original question, that Baldwin refused all demands to call out the Territorial Army as such, and when forced to use it did so on a civilian footing and armed with chair-legs instead of rifles.

This itself may only be a trivial example. But, despite one or two minor rampages by Churchill (then, of course, a member of the cabinet), the same emphasis marked all spheres of government activity. Indeed, it permeated it so thoroughly that by and large the wider activities of the ruling class as a whole were held in check and remained—at any rate by continental comparisons—relatively restrained.

Coercive Side of State Apparatus

To take, first of all, the directly coercive side of the state apparatus.

This had two major components: legal and organisational. On the legal side there was the Emergency Powers Act passed in Autumn 1920. This enabled the government to proclaim a state of emergency and to issue its own legally enforceable regulations. But the powers conferred were eminently constitutional and within the limits acceptable to right-wing Labour. The object was to maintain 'services essential to the public safety and the life of the community' and explicitly excluded any power to impose military or industrial conscription or 'to make it an offence for any person or persons to take part in a strike or peacefully to persuade others to do so'. Moreover, once proclaimed, both the state of emergency and any emergency regulations had to gain parliamentary approval within seven days and be renewed monthly.

The organisational side of the apparatus—to ensure that essential services were in fact maintained—had been quietly under construction ever since the railway strike of 1919, and was of course all the more necessary now that Britain's notably decentralised local government was no longer always in establishment hands. The country had been divided into ten regions, each with its Civil Commissioner and a staff of senior civil servants seconded from Whitehall. Their job was not so much to build anything new as to combine all the existing local agencies of central government—transport, labour, health—into what amounted to a parallel (non-representative) system of local administration which could then serve as a command centre for existing local authorities (where co-operative), the police and military, local employers (especially those involved in transport, power and food) and volunteers enrolled through the local Volunteer Service Committees. This basic structure had been finalised at the time of the 1921 miners' strike, and far from being dismantled during the Labour Government's period in office was actually prepared for use against the dockers and tramwaymen.

Organisation for Maintenance of Supplies (OMS)

The main problem presented by these arrangements was that of maintaining them during non-emergency periods and in particular continually updating the lists of volunteers with the technical skills needed to replace strikers in essential services. It had been the failure to do this that led to the debacle of Red Friday, and it was in order to overcome it—to recruit and train a permanent standing army of skilled blacklegs—that the home secretary, Joynson Hicks, took it upon himself to stimulate the formation of the unofficial Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies in Autumn 1925.

This organisation, headed by an illustrious collection of half-pay army officers, was a bit out of line with other elements in government plans and viewed with some suspicion both by the Baldwin wing in the cabinet and the main architect of the emergency preparations in the civil service, Sir John Anderson. They were sceptical—correctly as it turned out—about the practical value of the sort of upper class riff-raff attracted to the OMS and concerned that it would introduce an overtly class accent into their preparations. In fact, though it did to an extent do this (and was described by some commentators as the beginnings of 'legal fascism') it probably also served to pre-empt—and keep within the establishment's grasp—forces that might otherwise have filled the ranks of the openly fascist paramilitary organisations then springing up.

The Armed Forces

However, as far as maintaining essential services was concerned, it was neither the OMS nor the Volunteer Service Committees that formed the lynchpin of the government plans. The key force was the navy. This had a number of major advantages for the kind of operation the government had in mind. It could move relatively unnoticed—and without opposition—around the coast between the major industrial centres. It had the capacity to handle supplies on a large scale and possessed its own technicians and engineers (some of its vessels were virtually floating power stations and were widely used for standby supplies of electric current).

By comparison the army was allotted only a minor role and though considerable numbers of

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troops were held in reserve, they were to be kept out of sight and movements restricted to the minimum. Law and order was to remain in the hands of the police and the locally controlled special constabulary whose numbers had been considerably increased in the months up to the strike.

These then were the government's plans: massive in scale, meticulous, drawing in almost every branch of the state machine but at the same time low key, non-provocative and designed to minimise in advance the chance of any major physical clash between the strikers and the state.

Harassment of the Left

The one exception was the treatment meted out to the Communists and others on the Left who could be credibly labelled as revolutionary and anti-constitutional (even if, and to some extent because, their main energies before and during the strike were devoted to emphasising that the immediate issue was in fact that of miners' wages). On this front the government acted with crude and brutal publicity. In the autumn of 1925 there was a spate of police raids and a massively publicised trial in which twelve members of the Party's executive were convicted of illegally promoting antagonism between classes and attempting the overthrow of constitutional government. In the months that followed the legal harassment intensified and was accompanied by a massive red scare campaign in the press.

Any examination of the home office correspondence register (or of the proportion of Communist Party members among those arrested during the strike) makes it plain that this was no accident and was designed to re-emphasise in practice—by the visible action of the police and local establishment in every locality—the crucial ideological division which the government was trying to establish between constitutional and unconstitutional methods. This becomes particularly clear when one compares the approach to the different sections of the Labour press during the strike. While, for instance, no serious attempt was made to interfere with the publication or distribution of the TUC's *Daily Herald* (in fact Baldwin expressly intervened to stop such action), a quite massive proportion of police manpower must have been involved in the job of hunting down the producers (and in many cases merely the possessors) of the innumerable unofficial local bulletins issued by the Left during the strike.

The State's Ideological Activities

Turning to the ideological side of the state's activities one finds exactly the same emphasis continued. The neutrality of the state should be maintained at all cost. The key issue was that of the constitution. But—at the same time as impressing on the TUC leaders the illegality of their actions—a path of retreat must be opened up that would compel them to use the same 'constitutional' arguments in self-justification against the Left.

If this could be done, and if the organisational and propaganda forces of the Labour Movement could then be mobilised against the Communists and their allies, it would at last be possible to create conditions for the final ideological isolation of the Marxist trend among the mass of trade union members. At one and the same time the movement could once again be imprisoned within the assumptions of capitalist economics (made safe for economism and reformism) and conditions created for winning the immediate class objective: isolating the miners and cutting their wages.

While it would be misleading to present this strategy as cut and dried right from the beginning (the antics of Churchill and Birkenhead together with the quite real lack of rapport between the mineowners and the government created a number of confusing cross currents) its basic assumptions were adhered to throughout and one or two examples should make this clear.

The Wage Negotiations

First, the wage negotiations themselves. Here what strikes one most is the rich diversity of instruments by which the government was able to achieve its objects. To start with, there was the ever useful device of the royal commission. Set up under Sir Herbert Samuel in September 1925 and reporting just two months before the strike, it began by distancing itself from both the unions and the mineowners ('while the mineowners presented a plan which is unacceptable, the Miners' Federation abstained from making any suggestion for meeting the immediate situation'). However, as one might expect, it quickly went on to emphasise that present wage levels were quite unrealistic and then to elaborate a beautifully lucid—but quite false—analysis of the forces which underlay the industry's collapse.

This done, the way was open for newspaper editorials, independent experts and the politicians. Reworking the commission's statistics and echoing the tremendous complexity of the subject, each attempted its own particular permutation: a little bit added on the working day, a slight reorganisation of wage differentials, a return to district negotiations. By the end of April there was virtually no self-respecting politician in Britain who had not published his personal solution. Yet all had one thing in common. They concentrated on the internal economics of the coal industry, only exceptionally referred to its place within the government's wider imperialist strategy and certainly never questioned it.

It was against this carefully prepared background that the government itself finally entered the lists.

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It did so first as a neutral arbiter between the miners and the mineowners—emphasising its goodwill, its wish to find a settlement but, as is made clear in the diary of Baldwin's secretary, Tom Jones, all the time probing for divisions and weaknesses among the miners' leadership.[5] Once the TUC leaders themselves took over negotiations the game was detach and compromise the moderates. The most dangerous stage came after the strike had begun, and official contact had been broken off. While stressing that the government had reached the end of the road—there could be no negotiation under duress—the scale of 'totally unofficial' personal discussions was stepped up. It was in these discussions, like those between the TUC and Sir Herbert Samuel which eventually formed the pretext for calling off the strike, the labour leaders were gulled into believing that a compromise solution was possible and the strike could be ended without loss of face.

At the same time a separate and 'independent' part of the state machine—the legal establishment—started to bombard the right-wing from a different direction. The strike, declared the law lords, was not just unconstitutional but downright illegal. Its perpetrators could be prosecuted. To say this was not of course meant in any way as a partisan intervention in the current dispute. It was simply a matter of fact. As Sir John Simon (a former Liberal Attorney General) explained with quite treacly unction: 'I hold, and I hope that at this time of day most people hold, that it is an essential part of the rights of the British wage-earner that he should have the right to strike, and that it should never be taken away from him. . . . What I wish to point out, however, . . . is that the decision of the Council of the Trade Union Executives . . . was not a lawful act at all. I am not saying this with the slightest desire to blame or praise, but it would be lamentable if the working classes of this country go on with this business without understanding that they are taking part in a novel and an utterly illegal proceeding'.[6]

The Mass Media

Perhaps the most sophisticated example of the state's ideological offensive was its handling of the mass media during the strike. Editorially and organisationally the Fleet Street and provincial press was left to fend for itself. It provided a good advertisement for the freedom of the press (even if most of the material printed was supplied by the government). There was, however, a special treatment for the two state organs: the BBC and the specially created government newspaper, the *British Gazette*.

The *British Gazette* was ostensibly placed under the guidance of Churchill (mainly to stop him interfering in other areas) and published a fairly brazen version of the government's success in keeping services running. It was a paper the ruling class as a whole could trust and identify with. The BBC, on the other hand, was to remain strictly impartial. It was to keep its independence under its managing director, John Reith, and broadcast only an objective version of the news without any propaganda.

This, at any rate, was how it was meant to appear. In fact, both the BBC and the *British Gazette* were run from the same room in the Admiralty and the material for both was checked—and some of it directly written—by one and the same man, the Assistant Chief Civil Commissioner and confidant of Baldwin, John Davidson (later chairman of the Conservative Party). None of Churchill's copy went to press without being fairly liberally blue-pencilled (a study of the drafts would no doubt provide an unusual insight into the government's ideological methods) and although Churchill did put up a fight against the enforced insertion of certain news items —like the famous story about the football match between strikers and police in Plymouth—he was eventually outvoted in the cabinet.

Control was no less total at the BBC. The news bulletins (which Reith took to reading himself after complaints that the regular announcers sounded 'panicky') were prepared at the Admiralty and phoned over by a specially installed direct line. Davidson later wrote 'my unofficial control was total'.[7] Or as Reith's diary puts it with disarming naivete: 'the Cabinet decision is really a negative one. They want to be able to say they did not commandeer us, but they know they can trust us not to be really impartial'.[8]

It was, therefore, not Reith but Davidson (and ultimately the Cabinet) who decided that the Archbishop of Westminster should be allowed to broadcast (he called the strike 'a sin against the obedience we owe to God') while the Archbishop of Canterbury should be excluded. The latter's mistake was to wander off the constitutional issue and put forward peace proposals for the mining dispute—proposals that would puncture the pretence that this was not what the strike was really about. Similarly Ramsay MacDonald was kept off the air (he might do the same thing) while once the strike was over the railwaymen's 'moderate' leader, J. H. Thomas, was

[5] T. Jones, *Whitehall Diaries* (Oxford 1969) II pp. 16 ff.

[6] J. Simon, *Three Speeches on the General Strike* (London 1926) pp. 2-5.

[7] R. James (ed), *Davidson Memoirs* (London 1969) pp. 246-9.

[8] C. Stuart (ed), *The Reith Diaries* (London 1975) p. 96.

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actively encouraged to broadcast an appeal for a return to work. As far as the government was concerned, freedom of speech depended on how far it helped or hindered the interests of the ruling class.

Clear Strategic Line

It is, of course, important not to overstress the degree of control and deliberation or underestimate the crosscurrents and contradictions to which the government was exposed.

But in examining the role of the state one crucial lesson must be that if the strike did represent a defeat for the working class, as to an extent it did, it was largely because the state was able to pursue a clear strategic line, know its objectives, successfully restrained any internal dissension and was thereby able to win the ruling class as a whole for what was a very tricky political manoeuvre. Had this not been so, had Churchill not been effectively muzzled and instead been able to win support in the country for the politics of ruling class mobilisation, it seems highly unlikely that it would have been possible to hold the issue to that of the constitution and so drive the TUC leadership down that carefully prepared road that ended with the complete disowning of extra-parliamentary action.

To this extent, it is important to remember the cohesive nature of the capitalist state and that to carry out its political functions it must establish a successful liaison—an ideological compatibility—between the state apparatus itself and the more informal areas of political control. Consequently, it is precisely at those times when old forms of control are breaking up, when 'democracy comes at a gallop', that the working class needs to be most aware that whatever new forms of representation or organisation it achieves—as long as they are not entered into on the basis of a mass understanding of the need to end capitalist state power—will themselves become potential weapons of control in the hands of the capitalist state.

In this case—during a period when Labour had for the first time achieved trade union organisation on a mass scale—we find Labour's own right-wing leaders being manoeuvred into a position where they effectively replaced local employers as the main purveyors of capitalist assumptions among working people, and the fact that the tactics used were soft rather than hard—chairlegs rather than rifles—did not make them any less effective. The capitalist state will always, and must always by its very nature, strive to capture and subordinate all areas of social organisation. There can be no areas of ideological neutrality. The class struggle will always be present.

The Countervailing Force

This is the first lesson. But there is also another lesson that needs to be drawn from the role of the state during the general strike, and this concerns the countervailing force of the organised working class.

Despite the immense power of the state machine, despite the sophistication of its ideological offensive, its meticulous preparations nonetheless broke down. The government was caught out by the quite unexpected degree of working class mobilisation. Indeed, it was more than caught out. It was frightened. Because those nine days saw something far more dangerous than just mass pickets and demonstrations. They saw the first preliminary expressions of working class state power.

Examining the government's own postmortem on the strike two things stand out. One was the realisation that it must draw back from the brink: that it was socially dangerous to carry forward the policy of wage reductions to other sections besides the miners. Even as things stood, there were strong arguments in the Cabinet that the position of the right-wing in the trade union movement would need to be buttressed by the adoption of new statutory schemes of industrial participation and profit sharing.[9] At all events, full 'wage flexibility' must be scrapped.

The other conclusion stems from the order of priority used by the government to assess its organisational mistakes.[10] What worried it most? It was certainly not the 'lack of protection' during the first days of the strike. This could easily be solved by creating a new police reserve. Nor was it even the small list of local authorities who refused to co-operate (or only reluctantly co-operated) with the government emergency preparations. These only formed a minute fraction of the total number of local authorities in the country. What really disturbed it was the degree to which the quite illicit authority of the strike committees had been recognised not just by many local employers but tacitly (and in some cases openly) by parts of its own emergency apparatus. Agreements had been struck about the movement of supplies. Strike committee passes had been accepted. This, it emphasised, was altogether intolerable and must never be repeated. And one can see why.

It meant that the organised working class was effectively enforcing on the ruling class and its allies precisely the same ideological reorientation that the government had been attempting on Labour. It meant that locally the capitalist state was being implicated in decisions that were antagonistic to its very nature and which thereby effectively dismantled

[9] Particularly interesting is the Cabinet memorandum submitted by Lord Salisbury and quoted in Skelley, *General Strike*, p. 49.

[10] PRO Treasury 163/26, Review of Emergency Procedure.

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it. The decision on the freedom to move supplies, for example, was not made on the basis of how far it helped the capitalist state but whether it contributed to the unity and cohesion of the working class in struggle. Employers would beg permission to move their goods on the grounds that it 'would not hurt the strike'. Once even tacit recognition was given to such assumptions, the whole structure of ruling class control could come quickly tumbling down.

To this extent, the General strike does mark a historic turning-point in the practical unmasking of state power in Britian. However, what still remains to be done—50 years later—is to take these lessons back into the Labour Movement as a whole.

The Councils of Action as a Form of Struggle

"Britain, Home of the General Strike"[1]

Mick Jenkins

(The author joined the Young Communist League in 1923 and the Communist Party in 1925. He acted as a courier during the General Strike and took part in the great cotton struggles of 1929-32. He was a full-time worker for the YCL and then for the CP and for many years Secretary of the East Midlands District of the CP. He was also for many years a delegate to the Manchester Trades Council and a shop steward.)

In January 1832 there was published a pamphlet entitled *Grand National Holiday and Congress of the Productive Classes* by William Benbow,[2] later a Chartist and member of the General Council of the National Charter Association. The pamphlet goes into detail as to the aims and objects of the "National Holiday," (also called the "Sacred Month"), and how the "Holiday" was to be organised—by stopping work. "When the people fight their own battle—when they have a proper opinion of themselves: that is when they are convinced of their own power and worth, they will then enjoy the advantages a people ought to enjoy . . . they will no longer be robbed of the fruits of their toil: no longer oppressed." (p. 5) "Can anything be more humane than the main object of our glorious holiday, namely, to obtain for all at the least expense to all, the largest sum of happiness for all." (p. 13). "Committees of management of the working classes must be forthwith formed in every city, town, village and parish throughout the United Kingdom" (p. 10). Details of the plan of action are given. The term "General Strike" took a few years more to come into use, whilst "Councils of Action" had to wait some 90 years before it was used.

Ten years after the publication of Benbow's pamphlet, the first General Strike in the world took place. Centred on Manchester and the S.E. Lancashire area, the strike affected large parts of the country. Bourgeois historians have dubbed this strike the "Plug Plot Riots", and are fairly unanimous that it was a spontaneous outburst against wage reductions and the harsh conditions of the Industrial Revolution, and as it arose without any blasts of trumpets, so it died down without any after effects. And yet there is much evidence that between January 1832 and July/August 1842, a general strike was a major topic of discussion in the trade union and Chartist movements. In July 1839 the Chartist National Convention passed a resolution to organise a General Strike commencing on August 12, 1839. There is no doubt that these years of discussion acted as a preparation for the General Strike that took place in August 1842.

Precursors of the Councils of Action

The ten years of discussion and practical experience in strikes and the building of trade unions, also helped to bring into existence the first embryonic "Councils of Action" the world had yet seen. Like the General Strike at that time they had another name for them—"Trades Conferences", reflecting the as yet early stage of trade union organisation and struggle. Emile Burns in *The General Strike: May 1926: Trades Councils in Action*, summarising the reports of 140 local Councils of Action said: ". . . the Council of Action really united the whole of the organised Labour movement in the area . . ." (p. 14). That is exactly what the Trades Conferences aimed

[1] Heading, Chapter II of *Communism and the General Strike*, by Wilfred H. Crook, Prof. Emeritus, Colgate University (1960).

[2] Facsimile reproduction in *International Review of Social History*, Ed. Dr. A. J. Rüter, 1936, vol. I.

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to do in 1842, and like some 1926 Councils of Action went further and included the unorganised workers in the popular mass trades meetings that elected delegates to the Trades Conferences.

Prior to the General Strike of 1842 delegate meetings of individual trades had taken place in towns, sometimes covering a region. Occasionally delegate meetings of more than one trade in an industry such as the Five trades of Mechanism in Manchester—South Lancashire area—were held, but delegate meetings of all trades came into existence in the course of the General Strike. These Trades Conferences were not the result of previously existing organisation—as with the Trades Councils in 1926—on the contrary Trade Union organisation was still at an early stage of development, nor was there a central directive body like the General Council of the TUC—nevertheless as the strike developed so the Manchester Delegate Conference took on the character of a Central Council of Action, with delegates attending from both individual trades and delegates from local Trades Conferences. The *Northern Star* of August 20, 1842 reports that delegates from Leicester, Dewsbury, Wakefield and Leeds either attended or were elected to attend the Manchester Trades Conference on August 16.

The Conference of the day before, August 15, had delegates present representing 85 trades and the *Northern Star* of August 20 reported that delegates in rotation stated the opinions of their constituents and the instructions they had received from them as to the necessary steps to be taken, and added, "During the day 85 delegates thus delivered their instructions, representing all the respective trades of Manchester, and of most if not all the towns and villages within 20 miles thereof." The *Manchester Guardian* of August 20, 1842, said; "There are numerous reports of other trades groups continuing to meet in Manchester. They had all probably been sitting continuously throughout the strike and either acted independently of the central conference or, more likely receiving daily reports from their delegates". The importance of the central trades conferences was demonstrated on the one hand by the thousands of strikers who gathered round the halls where conferences met, waiting to hear their decisions, and on the other by the harassment of the civil authorities, police and military.

One hundred and forty one delegates attended the August 16 Conference at the Manchester Hall of Science, but thousands assembled outside. The extraordinary display of police and military force failed to move the crowd. Eventually the Superintendent of the Manchester Police along with a number of magistrates entered the hall and after failing to intimidate the Chairman, Mr. Alexander Hutchinson, or the delegates, they delivered an ultimatum, that the hall had to be cleared within ten minutes. In consequence of this illegal interference the proceedings were brought to a close, but not until in the very teeth of the authorities the Conference passed the resolution, "That the people's delegates, now assembled, do recommend their constituents to adopt all legal means to carry into effect the People's Charter: that they send delegates to every part of the United Kingdom to endeavour to get the cooperation of the middle and labouring classes in carrying out the same, and that they cease work until it becomes the law of the land."[3] The resolution was carried by over 120 votes.

Many mass meetings of strikers were held at which trades conference decisions were reported, where resolutions were put and delegates elected. Normal picketing and mass picketing took place. Permits to work or finish work in small factories or workshops were issued. As a result of all this, there seems to have been very good direct contact between the trades conferences and the strikers. The trades conferences functioned continuously, but apart from a loose contact with the Manchester Trades Conferences they seemed to have functioned independently. The indications are that many of the forms of activity undertaken by the Councils of Action in 1926 were, in rudimentary form, in operation in 1842. In that sense the Trades Conferences were in fact embryonic Councils of Action.

Councils of Action 1920

If the 1842 Trades Conferences came into existence in the thick of the fierce struggle of the General Strike and because of the vicious persecution were prevented from fully maturing as organs of leadership and struggle, these handicaps did not operate the next time history presented the British Labour Movement with the need for Councils of Action. In 1920 the threat of war by the British Government and the Allied powers against Soviet Russia loomed large. The *Manchester Guardian* in an editorial (9.8.1920), said; ". . . the fact remains that for two years we have waged an unofficial war against Russia. . . ."

By mid-August 1920 a united Labour Movement in the form of a National Council of Action representing the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC, the Executive Committee of the Labour Party, and the Parliamentary Labour Party, came into existence. These bodies had five representatives each, and a further nine leading personalities in the Trade Union —Labour Movement were coopted members. When a special conference of the Labour Movement called by the Council of Action with only four days notice resulted in over 1,000 delegates attending and passing a resolution which made a clear call for ". . . every form of withdrawal of labour . . . to end

[3] *Northern Star*, August 20, 1842.

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war and the interminable threats of war," the Government climbed down and Winston Churchill was hamstrung and could not fling his battalions into battle against the young Soviet Republic.

The unity of the Labour Movement and every section of it, had never reached such heights. In the leadership of the Council of Action, and the principal speakers at the National Conference were Ernest Bevin, J. R. Clynes, the Rt. Hon. J. H. Thomas, Margaret Bondfield, Frank Hodges, Ben Turner and others. When one reflects that six years earlier, decisions by the Labour Movement to fight war and the threat of war with a general strike and industrial action were overthrown and the masses led into the bloody war of 1914—1918. And when one reflects further that six years later, the leadership of the Labour Movement was to effect a treacherous sell-out, then how come the massive unity of 1920? The answer is simple enough. The leadership was responding to the mood and activity of the working and middle classes.

Why Their Success?

Throughout the year 1919, there was an insistent demand, particularly in the Labour Movement, but beyond as well, for the ending of Allied intervention and withdrawal of all Allied troops from Russia. On February 2, 1919 a great demonstration was held in the Free Trade Hall, Manchester, called jointly by the British Socialist Party (BSP), Socialist Labour Party (SLP), and the Independent Labour Party (ILP). There was a unanimous protest and demand for the withdrawal of troops. On June 21, 1919 another Free Trade Hall demonstration took place with Bob Smillie, President of the Miners Federation of Great Britain (MFGB), Bob Williams, Rhys Davies, and J. Brassington of the NUR (National Union of Railwaymen. At the annual conference of the Labour Party on June 27, 1919, Rhys Davies moved a composite resolution which was adopted. It called for ". . . immediate cessation of intervention," and for ". . . the unreserved use of their (Labour Party and TUC) political and industrial power."[4]

1920 was a year of public campaigning and activity to rouse the masses against the interventionist and war policy of Lloyd George and Winston Churchill. In February a mass meeting in the Albert Hall, London, called by the Hands off Russia Committee, with Tom Mann in the chair, was packed to the doors. Less than a month later another packed meeting was held in the same hall with George Lansbury as the chief speaker. On April 24 Poland invaded Russia along a 250 mile front. The *Daily Herald* carried banner headlines—NEW TRY TO CRUSH RUSSIA. On May 10 the London dockers refused to load munitions on to the Jolly George. The month of May saw meetings up and down the country, protesting at intervention, calling for political and industrial action. On May 21 the Executive Committee of the Miners Federation of Great Britain sent a strong protest to the Prime Minister. Ten days later the Triple Alliance sub-committee called for a special TUC. On June 9, the Executive Committee of the MFGB issued a call to the organised workers to refuse to manufacture or transport munitions of war for Ireland or Poland. The next day the special conference of the MFGB called for the convening of a special TUC.

This mounting pressure, particularly inside the Labour Movement, had its effect on the official Labour Movement and its leadership. On Friday August 6, Arthur Henderson as Secretary of the Labour Party sent a telegram to every local Labour Party in the country. ". . . Strongly urge local parties immediately organise citizen demonstrations against intervention and supply men and munitions to Poland. Demand peace negotiations, immediate raising blockade, resumption trade relations. Send resolutions Premier and Press. Deputise local MPs." This appeal found a ready response among the working class and among the middle class. Two days later the *Daily Herald* came out as a special issue on the Sunday with banner headlines—NOT A MAN. NOT A GUN. NOT A SOU! The next day, Monday, a meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party, the Executive Committee of the Labour Party and the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC took place. The resolution adopted declared that they felt "certain that war is being engineered between the Allied Powers and Soviet Russia . . . it therefore warns the Government that the whole industrial power of the organised workers will be used to defeat this war".[5] The conference agreed a Council of Action be immediately constituted.

Working Class Pressure

On the same day over 5,000 people attended a mass meeting of protest in Stevenson Square, Manchester, organised by the Manchester and Salford Trades Council and Manchester Labour Party, with Ellen Wilkinson as the principal speaker. The *Manchester Guardian* carried a series of reports of meetings and resolutions etc. from the localities. Barrow engineers will take no part in the manufacture or transport of munitions; Birmingham Trades Council calls for direct action; Merthyr miners threaten to stop work; Welsh railwaymen issue a warning; Clyde workers protest; Nottingham holds a record meeting of protest; Dr. Guest speaks

[4] *Labour Party Annual Report*. 1919, p. 156.

[5] Report of the Special Conference on Labour and the Russian-Polish War, August 13, 1920, p. 3.

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at Woolwich; Ashton Labour Party protests; Gorton United Trades and Labour Council declares against war; at the end of a meeting of worship at the Friends Meeting House Manchester, a protest resolution is passed; Liverpool Transport Workers Federation calls for a meeting of the Triple Alliance; the ILP calls for citizens meetings. The *Manchester Guardian* itself commented:

> "At almost every important centre during the week-end large meetings representative of diverse Labour and other interests have protested with remarkable vigour and unanimity against the Government's Russian policy, and pledging the utmost exertion to prevent war."

All this agitation and activity resulted in Councils of Action being formed in the localities up and down the country. No wonder that the Right Honourable J. R. Clynes could say at the Special Conference ". . . . There has been no division of opinion and no wavering of decision of any kind on the part of the whole of the Members of the Parliamentary Party. (cheers). . . . We must be saved from war by an effective League of Labour Action (cheers) working upon lines to make it impossible to send a ship, a gun, to send material or money for this nefarious purpose".[6] Or that Ramsay MacDonald could say after the Government was forced to climb down, ". . . . That it was Labour's action that saved us from war."[7]

An American writing on British Labour and the Russian Revolution made the shrewd comment that "Those within its ranks who had opposed 'direct action' in every previous crisis would have done so again had the public demand for action not been so insistent," and added ". . . . It was an act without precedent." [8]

The Councils of Action did not have time—nor was there need—to go into action. This was because the Councils of Action represented a real threat to the authority of the Government, and this was so, not because of the speeches of the right-wing Labour leaders, but because of the mass movement in action, backed by all the peace loving people, which forced the official Labour Movement into line.

General Strike 1926

1842 saw the General Strike, and with it the embryonic Councils of Action, for the first time in history, though virtually strangled at birth. In 1920 came the threat of a General Strike, but with the widespread formation of Councils of Action, with body and limbs well formed and in gear for action. 1926 saw the second General Strike, with Councils of Action operating throughout the length and breadth of the land, most of them confident and with experienced local trade union and labour workers to lead them. Whilst the 1842 General Strike was not exactly a "bolt from the blue", the threat of general strike in 1920 and the General Strike of 1926 came as a result of the agitation and activity of the rank and file of the Labour Movement. In 1926 this resulted in the General Strike taking place, and with it the formation of the local Councils of Action.

The threat of general strike was on the agenda in 1921. The collapse of the Triple Alliance resulted in Black Friday. (A million miners were locked out. The employers demanding the ending of the national wage regulations, annulment of the uniform national increases that had been awarded, and resumption of the old system of district agreements. Seven hours before the Railway and Transport unions were due to come out in support of the miners the stike was called off. The Triple Alliance collapsed.)[9] Four years later the threat of general strike brought Red Friday. Baldwin had said—all workers have got to take a wage cut. The coalowners had given notice to the miners to terminate existing agreements, and proposed (1) drastic wage reductions, (2) abolition of the principle of a minimum wage, and (3) reversion from national to district agreements. The miners were to be locked out on July 31, 1925. The General Council of the TUC in agreement with the Railway and Transport Unions placed an embargo on the movement of coal. This unity and militant action threw the Government into confusion, they announced a subsidy to the coal industry for nine months to allow a royal commission to make a detailed enquiry.[10] And so for 30 million pounds the Government bought itself a breathing space of some nine months.

Councils of Action Set Up

Whilst the Government utilised the time it had bought to make preparations to deal with a general strike, the General Council of the TUC did nothing. Not so the local trade unions and Labour Movement. In many localities there was a recognition that the Government had bought time and would come back to the attack. Some, like Preston, followed Red Friday with the setting up of a Council of Action, that is some nine months before the General Strike. Hull followed Preston soon after. In some towns Councils of Action were set up a few weeks before the strike started, but most Councils of Action were formed in the last few days before the strike or the first day or two of the strike.

[6] *Ibid.* p. 12.
[7] *Forward.* August 28, 1920.
[8] Stephan Richards Graubard, *British Labour and the Russian Revolution 1917-1924*, pp. 112/13.
[9] Allen Hutt, *The Post-War History of the British Working Class*, LBC ed, 1937, pp. 57-60.
[10] *Ibid.* pp. 109-111.

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The haste with which the Councils of Action came into existence naturally created problems for them. Nor were matters helped as a result of the vague instructions from the General Council of the TUC. To add to the difficulties there was the confusion created by the fact that the local trade union organisations and their officials felt obliged to take their instructions from their union headquarters. But these immense difficulties were countered by the tremendous militant spirit of class solidarity, by the will to victory, by the creativeness of the working class, all of which led to the speedy development of the Councils of Action, and in the majority of cases the Council of Action quickly became the authoritative and accepted local leadership.

St. Helens Example

An insight into how a Council of Action functioned in the strike was related by Bob Davies of Westhoughton, who at the time of the 1926 General Strike was the vice-chairman of the St. Helens Council of Action.[11] He said that the St. Helens Trades and Labour Council had set up the Council of Action some weeks before the strike. It started functioning properly on the first day of the strike and met every morning after. All the trades and the trade union branches whose members were on strike were represented. Many who were affiliated but never sent delegates to the Trades and Labour Council were represented by regular attenders throughout the strike at the meetings of the Council of Action, which were held every morning commencing at 10.30 am. Between 60 and 70 attended each day. After the roll call delegates would get up and make reports on their sector of the strike.

One of the things the St. Helens Council of Action took charge of was the issuing of permits for the carrying of foodstuffs. The Council of Action decided that they would issue permits for the transport of food in the town. They decided that permits would be granted to personal applicants and only after satisfying the Council would a permit be issued.

Another most important first step was the arrangement of a meeting between the Chairman and Secretary of the Council of Action and officials of the St. Helens Co-op Society. As a result of this meeting a provisional agreement was made to cooperate in the distribution of foodstuffs should a scarcity arise during the strike. It was understood that pickets would bring the food lorries to the Co-op warehouses.

Mass meetings were held every afternoon on the market square at which officials and members of the Council gave reports of developments in the strike. of local events, and plans and activity for the next day or two. On the Sunday of the strike a mass meeting was held in the Hippodrome. Over 2,000 were packed inside and as many at an overflow meeting outside. James Sexton, local MP and Joe Tinker, MP for Leigh were the principal speakers. Bob Davies held the fort for an hour outside until the MPs came out. "Sexton was very Right Wing and Tinker more to the Left, but both spoke like revolutionaries. The enthusiasm was enormous and had affected both Sexton and Tinker" commented Bob Davies.

The Council of Action issued a strike bulletin. Materials for the Bulletin were supplied by delegates. Couriers on motor bikes took the Bulletins to the Councils of Action in Liverpool, Warrington, Wigan, Southport, Preston, Earlstown, Leigh, etc., and brought back any local material available. The Bulletins were also taken to all St. Helens TU branches whether on strike or not.

One of the best organised groups was the tramwaymen. They achieved a 100 per cent turn-out by the second day, and then took part in the general picketing. Most of the 300 members attended the meetings to hear the report of Bob Davies, who was their delegate to the Council of Action. These meetings were real morale boosters. The members would stay on after the meeting to take part in general picketing or go out in groups to chalk the pavements with announcements or messages, or to put posters up or other propaganda activity.

As each day went by so the spirit of the strike gripped the delegates and in turn the delegates conveyed this spirit to the mass of the strikers and those not called upon to strike. Some engineers though not called on to strike came out at the beginning. Each day strengthened and deepened the conviction of these leaders of the St. Helens workers, in the justice and correctness of their stand in defence of the miners. "There was plenty of political discussion among the Council of Action delegates. 'Left-wing and Right-wing' was not heard. It was there, but it was submerged in the over-all action at the time. Workers were in confident mood," commented Bob Davies. "As the days went by these workers felt they had a bit of power and if the strike had not been betrayed these workers would have gained an understanding of the power of the organised working class." Bob added "Maybe that's why Thomas and company betrayed it."

Councils Embodied the Unity of Labour

"The Council of Action in its most comprehensive form is the most suitable model, embracing representatives of the workers' economic and political organisations, of the Co-operative Societies, of

[11] Bob Davies has now published an account of the St. Helens Council of Action in *1926: the General Strike*, edited by Jeffrey Skelley, Lawrence & Wishart, 1976, pp. 330-339.

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Labour groups on local authorities and all other definitely Labour organisations . . . during the strike the most important factor in the successful working was the coordination of all Labour forces." (Emile Burns, p. 86)[12] Many Councils of Action achieved a composition which was complete or near complete unity of the whole of the local Labour movement. Brighton Council of Action in addition to trade union branch and strike committee representation, also had four from the Labour Party, four from the Co-op, two from the ILP and one from the Working Women's Council. The St. Albans council had representatives from the Co-op and Co-op Educational Committee, the Women's Guild, the local Labour Party, the ILP, and the NCLC. At Rutherglen the local Unemployed Committee were represented. Paddington had delegates from all bodies in the Borough and every branch of the trade unions whether affiliated to the Trades Council or not.

In some of the bigger towns or areas—Merseyside, London, Teesside, Methil in East Fife, the most successful being Northumberland and Durham, attempts were made to set up District Councils of Action intended to act as links between the General Council and the local Councils of Action, or with neighbouring towns and villages. These were not successful, they did not achieve the same comprehensiveness as the local Councils of Action. Emile Burns comments on these efforts: "On the whole, therefore, although there is not sufficient experience of the working of such a District Council of Action to justify any detailed suggestions, it can be said that the aim should be to establish an all-in organisation on a district basis." (p. 81).

Picketing was, in the main, organised by the individual unions on strike. Mass picketing became necessary in some areas because of blackleg transport. Bolton Council of Action reported that 2,280 pickets were mobilised in two days. All wore a white silk ribbon badge. Twenty-nine push bikes and 57 motor bikes were mobilised for picket and messenger work. Pickets were on duty four hours and had 20 off. (The Swindon Council of Action arranged with the Co-op. Society to keep 300 gallons of petrol in hand for supply to dispatch riders). At Doncaster and Barnsley mass picketing stopped blackleg traffic, but also led to severe conflicts with the police. On the other hand in Methil, East Fife, a Workers' Defence Corp was formed at the beginning of the strike with 150 men, but after police charges on the pickets, the Corps was increased to 750 men. The area was patrolled by the Corps, organised in companies under ex-NCO's. ". . . and there was no further interference by the police with pickets".

[12] Emile Burns—*General Strike: Trades Councils in Action*, reprinted by Lawrence & Wishart, 1975, £1.25.

Activities and Problems

One of the most effective weapons on the Government side was its propaganda machine. Lies and misleading propaganda was poured out in a never ending stream. *The British Worker*—the organ of the General Council—whilst it reached a circulation of one million by the end of the strike, gave very little leadership or help to the millions of strikers or to the Councils of Action. Lines of communication over the country as a whole were never planned or organised. On the other hand local Councils of Action in the bigger towns produced local bulletins, a few printed, most duplicated. Local offices of the Labour Party, TU's, CP, Co-op, ILP, provided the technical equipment. These Bulletins gave reliable news, and published denials of false statements from the Government and Government sources. They contained reports of the situation nationally and of local activity, many carried editorial paragraphs on the character of the strike, and on the conflict with the Government. The better organised Councils produced as many as 10,000 daily. Humorous paragraphs, verses and cartoons found their way into some of the Bulletins. The Bulletins played an important role, not only in giving authentic local and national news, countering misleading propaganda, but also played a part in the organising work of the Councils, and helped to maintain and strengthen morale.

A serious weakness was the lack of cooperation between the Co-operative Movement and the strikers. There were no national agreements, and only in a few localities were sympathetic understandings arrived at. And yet the very limited experience of co-operation showed what a tremendous strengthening of the strike could have taken place had there been a national agreement and local cooperation. In some areas local Co-op. Societies gave credit to their members on strike; credit vouchers issued by the Council of Action or TU were accepted by the Co-op. and food supplied paid for later by the Council of Action or the TU; some gave money, either loans or donations; some provided rooms for offices or meetings; one or two advanced strike pay because of the difficulty of cheques arriving on time; some kept prices down and this forced private trades to do the same; one or two Co-ops had direct representation on the Councils of Action or their Executives.

As the strike developed so the scope of the activities of the Councils of Action broadened, more sub-committees were set up and so the need for a Council of Action executive or a more permanent leadership was felt. Some Councils of Action were meeting for four and five hours every day, dealing with reports, with questions and problems they were faced with. A few Councils did have Executive Committees acting as a central leadership

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available all the time. In connection with this question of leadership, Communist Party members and militants in the localities gave of their best to organise the work and maintain continuous leadership. The Communist Party was wholely devoted to the preparation and effective carrying through of the General Strike. How serious a threat to the plans of the Government this was can be gauged from the fact that as far back as October 1925 the Government arrested 12 leaders of the CPGB tried them and sent them to prison for six to twelve months.

Great changes took place between 1842 and 1926, but a common feature of both General Strikes was that of class confrontation, the element of Dual Power existed. Had either strike continued for a period of time then the question of class power and rule would have become the dominant issue. In 1842 Capitalism in Britain was on the ascendancy and the Labour Movement in its early days. In 1926 capitalism in Britain was already in decline. Now, 50 years later, Capitalism in Britain is in deep crisis. In contrast the working class has been greatly strengthened, both politically by its consistant anti-Tory stand, but also by the addition of millions of white collar workers, nurses, hospital workers, technicians, managerial and staffs joining the Trade Union and Labour Movement. There has also been a tremendous growth of the anti-capitalist and democratic movement in the form of the militant Women's Liberation, the Student movement, the fight against racialism and for international solidarity. The conditions that gave rise to the threat of General Strike in 1920, again in 1921, again in 1925, and the General Strike of 1926 exist and have intensified. The lessons of these great historic events need to be learned and applied.

Role and Functions

One of the most important experiences of all these events was that of the role and function of *Councils of Action in the localities in times of great* class battles. In times of day to day class struggle the trade unions and the Labour Movement fulfil the role of defending and advancing the interests of the working class. But to be alert to the possibility of great class battles, to be prepared to transform existing organisation to meet the needs of a sharpened class confrontation, that is the responsibility and duty of all class conscious workers and militants. The principal method of the formation of Councils of Action was the transformation of the local Trades Councils, or Trades and Labour Councils into Councils of Action. Today there is a great need to strengthen the Trades Councils; to win the affiliation of all local trade union branches, including the white collar and other workers who have in recent years come into the trade union movement; to win the association of the students and youth with the trades councils; to win the women workers to participate in the work of the trades councils. All this would result in a tremendous strengthening of the Trades Councils.

And if to the Trade Councils there came as delegates a sufficient number of local and district trade union officials and leading personalities, together with leading rank and file workers from the factories, and if among them were officials or active people in the local Labour and Communist Parties, and in the local Co-operative movement, then the Trades Councils would be representative of the local Labour movement. Such a Trades Council would be enabled to take decisions based on thorough debate and exchange of views and have the confidence that its decisions would be carried out.

The traditional functions of a Trades Council—that of working for one hundred per cent trade union organisation, giving help and assistance to small and struggling unions, special help to poorly organised sections like women and youth, solidarity action with workers on strike, campaigns for shorter hours, etc.—remain most important. However in these days of economic and political crisis, inflation, mass unemployment, direct and indirect attacks on the standards of the working and middle class people, and also the great international issues—the threat of war, violent and brutal fascist dictatorships, as in Chile, also are very important. All this calls for progressive policies and wider activities by the Trades Councils without neglecting the local social and democratic questions. They also need to give support to activities organised by other bodies working for social and democratic advance.

By adopting policies that help to advance the whole movement and with a broadening of activities, Trades Councils will become more authoritative bodies, easily and quickly transformed in times of crisis into Councils of Action, ready to meet the needs of the situation.

In the June or July issue

BERT RAMELSON

on

THE ROLE OF THE GENERAL STRIKE TODAY

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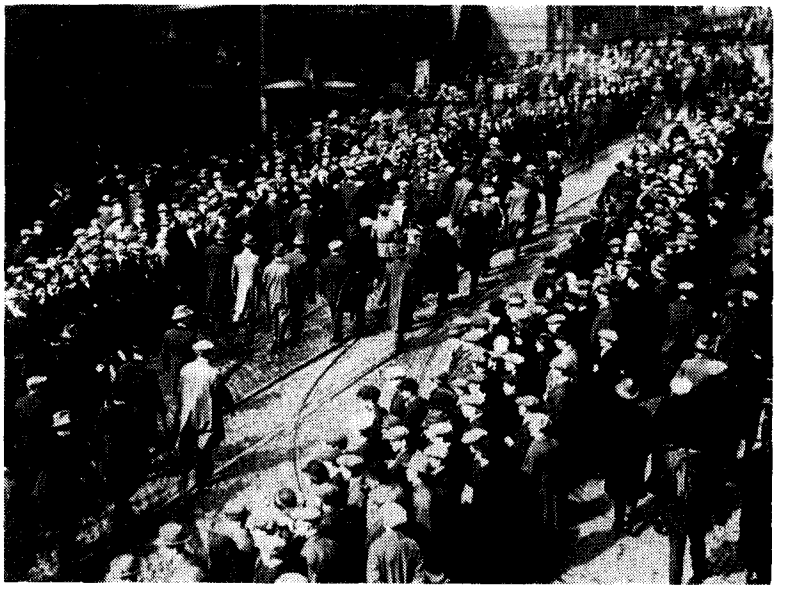
THE STRUGGLE



General Strike: Demonstration in Albert Street, Manchester (Working Class Movement Library, Manchester)

Railway sidings idle

Mass Meeting on Clapham Common, May 9

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Marxism versus Reformism in the General Strike

Jack Cohen

(Jack Cohen helped to form the YCL in his native Manchester in 1923 and joined the Communist Party in 1924. He worked full time for both YCL and Communist Party for many years and was in South Wales as YCL organiser during both the General Strike and the Miners' Strike.)

Like wars, general strikes cannot be approached in any abstract or generalised way, regarding them as, by definition, a prelude to, or part of, revolution or as being primarily industrial struggles. Each general strike must be treated concretely in the light of the political and economic features which give rise to it.

The 1926 General Strike has, therefore, to be seen firstly in the light of the post-World War I crisis of British capitalism, its weakened position vis-a-vis the United States, the continuing slump after a very short-lived boom, involving large-scale unemployment, and the determination of the ruling class to place all the burdens of the crisis on the working class expressed openly in the notorious statement made by the then Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, in 1925, that "the wages of all workers must come down".

The mining industry, then under private ownership, became the focal point of the struggle because it was technically backward, unprofitable and its owners determined that come what may, profits were to be squeezed out of the miners by imposing longer hours and reduced wages. They attacked first in 1921 and again in 1925, when, confronted with the threat of solidarity action by the whole trade union movement which could have developed into a general strike (Red Friday), were rescued by the government with a nine-months subsidy and the labour movement held off by the appointment of a Royal Commission on the industry—both of which were used to make preparations for a full-scale attack on the miners and through them on the entire trade union movement.

The second feature which needs to be taken into account was the character of the leadership of the labour and trade union movement, especially its basic outlook.

Although the 1914-1918 war and the October Revolution in Russia in 1917 had stimulated advances by the left (rise of the shop stewards movement and the militant struggles it led, the big increase in trade union membership, the adoption of socialist aims—clause 4—in the Labour Party Constitution at its 1918 Conference, and particularly, the formation of the Communist Party in August 1920), the dominant positions in the Labour movement were held by right-wing leaders of the Thomas-Bevin-Cramp-Clynes-Citrine variety in the trade unions and Henderson and MacDonald in the Labour Party. This, despite the advance of Left policies at the Scarborough TUC in 1925 and the winning of seats on the General Council by men who, until the 1926 General Strike, had fought for left-wing policies in the Labour movement (Hicks, Purcell). The dominant ideology of these right-wing leaders was class-collaborationist, reformist, acceptance of the social and political status-quo and a total devotion to parliamentarism and "the Constitution" as the sole methods of political advance.

Two Lines in the General Strike

The implications of this situation were to be seen in their attitude to the General Strike, in the character of their leadership of it, and, above all, in the frantic haste with which they betrayed it.

Detailed accounts of the General Strike and marxist analyses of its outcome are available (see particularly *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain—the General Strike, 1925-6*, Vol. II, by James Klugmann, on which I have leaned heavily in this section and, the recently published *1926, the General Strike*, edited by Jeffrey Skelley, both published by Lawrence & Wishart.). Here I want to contrast the two lines of marxism and reformism in the General Strike itself, reflecting the two opposed lines in the British labour movement which have been in conflict for many decades, especially since the formation of the Communist Party in 1920.

These two opposing lines were contrasted most sharply in all phases of the 1926 General Strike—in the period leading up to it i.e. from July 1925 to May 1926, during the Nine days and during the six months when the miners were left to battle on their own.

From July 1925 to May 1926

During this period the government was busy making its political, administrative and military

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preparations to crush any attempt by the organised labour movement to repeat the solidarity action of "Red Friday". The General Council, however, made no preparations whatsoever although, as the Miners' statement to the January 1927 Conference of Union Executives pointed out, "the miners and the other trade unionists stood together in 1925. This position was reaffirmed in February 1926".

This lack of preparation was justified by Citrine, General Secretary of the TUC at the above mentioned Conference ". . . as far as preparation for a General Strike was concerned, the General Council never attempted to do such a thing and in my opinion they would have failed most lamentably had they attempted anything of the kind". The reason for this was undoubtedly the hope that the Commission's report would offer the possibility of some sort of compromise which would enable them to settle the dispute and avoid a general strike.

The Communist Party, whilst greeting the victory of "Red Friday", warned the workers not to rest on their laurels but to understand that ". . . the government, acting on behalf of the capitalist class is certain to prepare for renewed struggle with the working class under more favourable circumstances than this time, and will endeavour to break the united front of the workers in order to make its attack successful" (*Workers Weekly*, August 7, 1925).

All through the summer and autumn of 1925 the Communist Party made efforts to push the TUC and the Labour Party into taking action in view of the steps being taken by the government in preparation for a possible general strike.

At the end of August 1925 the National Minority Movement called a Conference of Trade Unionists under the slogan "Prepare for the Coming Fight" which was attended by 683 delegates representing approximately three-quarters of a million workers.

This was followed by a consistent campaign in the *Workers Weekly* to get pressure exerted by the labour movement on the General Council to make preparations to support the miners and the Party leadership took special steps to mobilise the Party itself in a series of extended executive meetings and district conferences.

The Party gave every support to a special conference called by the Minority Movement on March 21, 1926 attended this time by 883 delegates representing close on one million workers.

The conference warned that "reformist elements in the Labour movement will concur with their recommendations (of the Royal Commission on the Mining Industry issued on March 6, 1926) and lose sight of the attacks upon living standards contained in the Report—which the trade unions must fight . . . therefore prepare at once". The conference also issued a call for the development of all-embracing Councils of Action, based especially on the Trades Councils.

But despite all these efforts no real preparations were made by the time the Special Conference of Trade Union Executives met on April 29-30 and voted overwhelmingly to come out in support of the miners, locked out on April 30 by the mine owners who were demanding savage wage cuts, longer hours and district agreements.

How the Strike was Estimated

From the outset the right-wing leaders emphasised repeatedly that they regarded it simply as an industrial struggle and nothing more.

Thus in the House of Commons debate on the Emergency Regulations on May 3, 1926 which the government had introduced, J. H. Thomas said that the Trade Union Congress leaders ". . . repudiate immediately and emphatically that this is a challenge to the government, they have issued instructions that anyone who invites or suggests insubordination or mutiny by troops or sailors is to be repudiated, that so far as they are concerned they want to make it an industrial dispute and nothing else".

John Bromley MP (locomotive men's leader in the same debate) argued that "any suggestion that this dispute is a challenge to constitutionalism or an endeavour to overthrow the government is wrong . . . the Government must govern".

J. H. Thomas explained "I have never disguised that in a challenge to the Constitution, God help us, unless the Government wins. . . . This is merely a plain, economic, industrial dispute."

And Ramsay MacDonald, (*Socialist Review*, June 1926) "It was no constitutional issue at all. The TUC did not even think of the Government as a party to the dispute" ! ! !

All this emphasises the full and total acceptance of the capitalist state and its institutions by the right-wing leaders as inviolable. The "Government must govern" even against the interests of the entire working class.

The Communist Party, on the other hand, emphasised from the very beginning that the General Strike was no "ordinary" industrial dispute but a political confrontation of a very high order between the two major classes in British society:

> "The fact that every mass strike is a political strike was clearly revealed in spite of the denials of the General Council. The basic industries were stopped not to coerce the mine owners but to coerce the government. The General Council was objectively decreeing that no food should be transported without its permission, that no person should travel to or from work by the recognised public means. To render these prohibitions effective its local organs had to enter into conflict with the emergency

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> organisations of the Government. It had to call upon the workers to be loyal to their unions which was, in effect, to be disloyal to the Government which was locked in conflict with those unions. The germs of alternative government were apparent" (From the Thesis on the General Strike adopted at the 8th Congress of the CPGB quoted in Klugmann, p. 221).

The General Council line that it was simply "a plain industrial dispute" was not merely a gross deception in view of the massive measures taken by the Government to defeat the strike by every possible means, but one of the foundations on which the betrayal of the miners was built and the General Strike betrayed.

Right-wing trade union leaders had, over the years, developed a time-honoured method for settling strikes. These were regarded not as manifestations of class struggle, as conflicts between the opposed interests of hostile classes, but as differences to be settled by negotiations on the basis of a suitable "formula" which would as far as possible be fair and agreeable to both sides since they both had "rights". This would normally be achieved by gentlemanly compromise, each side making concessions, the amount of a wage demand, or in other cases of a wage cut, being usually split down the middle.

This is the method they sought to use in the 1926 General Strike but this time only one side made concessions, total concessions—the General Council.

The Search for a Formula

Immediately after the Conference of Executives of Trade Unions held on April 29-30, 1926, had voted overwhelmingly to come out in support of the miners, the General Council initiated negotiations in search of the traditional "formula", despite the fact that the whole Conference had just proclaimed its readiness to support the miners in their fight against wage cuts and increases in hours.

The Government initially broke these off, but agreed to "conversations" about resuming them on May 1 and themselves came up with a "formula". This fixed the negotiations within the framework of discussions which included wage cuts and longer hours and tied the General Council to work for them as far as the miners were concerned, since in return for resumption of negotiations and acceptance of completely vague proposals for the reorganisation of the mining industry made in the Royal Commissions' Report, the formula stated ". . . the representatives of the Trade Union Congress are confident that a settlement can be reached on the lines of the Report within a fortnight". But "the lines of the Report" included proposals for the "adjustment of wages and hours" said to be only "temporary" but equally vague as to when and if they would ever be readjusted. And it was this formula which the TUC negotiating team accepted.

Thus J. H. Thomas in the House of Commons on May 3, only a few hours before the strike actually began, said "I say . . . that at 11 o'clock on Sunday night not a formula but the Prime Minister's own words, in his own writing were in my possession as a means of settling and I accepted it . . . perhaps I had better say 'we'! We not only accepted it but we had accepted the responsibility of saying 'never mind what the miners or anyone else say'—we accept it".

And in their report to the Conference of the Executives of Trade Unions held on June 25, 1926 to discuss the outcome of the General Strike, the TUC General Council admitted that the settlement agreed with Sir Herbert Samuel involved wage cuts, longer hours, district agreement and, because the miners would not accept these terms, they called the strike off.

They described the attitude of the miners as "mere negation" and added: "Having regard to the impossibility of excluding the wages question from consideration in dealing with the Commission's Report and the enormous responsibility involved in carrying on the Strike, the Council felt that the position was too grave to justify their being tied to a mere slogan (i.e. "not a second on the day; not a penny off the pay")."

After prolonged discussion with the miners who refused to budge on the wages question, the "Council unanimously adhered to the decision arrived at, that in the circumstances they were not justified in continuing the sacrifices and risks of the sympathetic strike . . . the Council accordingly proceeded to advise the Unions to terminate the strike. . . ."

It should be added that before and during the strike the miners' demands were attacked as "dogma", "mere slogans" etc. J. H. Thomas on May 3 went even further. He advanced arguments expressing deeply felt ideas amongst right-wing trade union leaders about the "rights" of employers in industrial disputes and in negotiations concerning them as well as about "fairness" in industrial relations:

> "In 1917 Liverpool railwaymen went on strike to force an advance in wages and South Wales railwaymen went on strike and the companies intimated that they would refuse to negotiate anything with me under threat of the strike. I went down and resigned my position because I said: that is a fair theory for the employers and it is not right for an employer to have a revolver presented at his head. . . . I do not believe negotiations can be carried out under threats of this kind."

Thomas clearly was in sympathy with the Government and coalowners' view of the decision of the Trade Union Congress to rally all its forces behind the miners, as a "threat".

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Students load coal at King's Cross

Special Constables Enrol

This concept of "fairness" was reflected also in the decision of the General Council that printers working on labour and socialist papers which supported the strike should be brought out along with those on capitalist papers which opposed it.

Pressure on the Miners to Capitulate

Every sort of pressure was brought to bear on the miners' leaders to capitulate. Some, Machiavellian and hypocritical in the extreme, others simply based on lies. "Every time we met the Government with the General Council we were always asked to agree to a reduction in wages and when the General Council left us we were then again to face a reduction in wages" (A. J. Cook at the January 1927 Conference of Trade Union Executives). That was one kind of pressure. Others were more subtle like the argument of "solidarity". Bevin, for example, "appealed to us to go back with them as we came out; that will show a spirit of solidarity unequalled in any other country. . . Mr. Purcell spoke on the same lines. . . ." (Herbert Smith at the same Conference).

J. H. Thomas at this Conference admitted that he had applied the same ignominious pressure. He had said to the miners ". . . the better plan will be to save victimisation, to save the aftermath, that you miners should ask us to declare it off. That will give confidence to the rank-and-file and we will go back a united body. *We ask you to ask us to declare it off* (my italics J.C.) ! ! !

Ben Turner (wool textile workers' leader) conbined ingenious double talk with falsehoods. Herbert Smith (in the same speech) reported: "Mr. Ben Turner also appealed to us to return to work with them and *save the general strike in the future* (my italics J.C.). He pointed out that from information received . . . the General Strike was on the 'slippery slope' and that many unions that came out sympathetically . . . would return in 'driblets' and that would spell disaster".

This latter story which was quite false, for the absolute contrary was the case, was used again and again, both as means of pressure on the miners and as justification for ending the strike.

The Party in the General Strike

The Communist Party devoted all its energies to making the strike a success. On the eve of the strike a number of members of the Executive Committee were sent out into the districts to participate in the struggle "on the spot", leaving a small working bureau in London to direct affairs.

On May 3, the eve of the strike, the day when Thomas, MacDonald and others were, on their own admission, "grovelling and pleading" with Baldwin to resume negotiations so that a "formula" could be found to end the strike, the Party produced a *Workers Daily* in 40,000 copies. This contained a Manifesto from the Party calling for solidarity with the miners as the crucial task for the whole working class, warning against attempts to impose wage cuts, longer hours and district agreements on them and counterposing to this the miners' slogan—"Not a penny off the pay—not a second on the day". It also produced centrally a *Workers Bulletin* every

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day during the strike, the circulation of which rose from its original 5,000 to 20,000.

Alongside analyses of day-to-day developments in the strike and corresponding leads for action, the Party began at a very early stage to include outlines of the more long-term political implications of the strike, as for example in its statement—*the Political Meaning of the General Strike* issued in the *Workers Bulletin* on May 5, which emphasised as one of the most important developments of the strike that—"the fact of police, soldiers, tanks, EPA etc., being paraded before the eyes of the workers was bound to raise before them as a practical question, the problem of the state, without their necessarily grasping all the theoretical implications".

In contrast to the shameful apologetics of the General Council who called off the strike abruptly at the very moment when enthusiasm for it amongst the workers was advancing to its highest level, and who placed the responsibility for having to end it on the alleged intransigence of the miners, the Political Committee issued the following statement to all Party organisations:

(1) The General Council had surrendered at the very moment when the workers were most enthusiastic;
(2) The surrender was a betrayal, not only of the miners, but of all workers;
(3) The Left-wingers on the General Council by their policy of cowardly silence, had left the Right-wing with a free hand to pursue their active policy of treachery;
(4) The workers must step in where leaders fail;
(5) The slogans should be Refuse to resume Work, Repudiate the Samuel Memorandum, Keep the Councils of Action and Strike Committees in Being;
(6) The miners should appeal direct to their fellow workers over the heads of the false leaders.

The devoted work of the Communist Party and all its members during the General Strike is illustrated by the fact that over a thousand of its members were arrested on various charges connected with the strike. This amounted to approximately one-fifth of the total membership at the time.

Attitudes to the General Strike as a Weapon of Struggle

The General Strike was the object of much discussion and controversy in the international labour movement long before 1926, during the course of which Right-wing, Ultra Left and Marxist attitudes to it began to crystallise.

For Bakunin and the Anarchists and the syndicalists in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the General Strike was linked directly with Revolution. Rosa Luxemburg, influenced by the experiences of the 1905 Revolution in Russia, initiated a discussion in the German labour and socialist movement on the "political mass strike" which, she argued, must be accepted as a form of struggle which would accompany the fight for Socialism.

Ferocious opposition to the idea of the General Strike came from the Right-wing leaders of the German trade unions meeting in congress at Cologne in 1905. These declared that the workers and their families would be the first to suffer; they would starve, the employers would reply with lock-outs and wage cuts and that General Strikes were "General Nonsense".

As early as 1912, when Syndicalist ideas were spreading in Britain, Ramsay MacDonald in a pamphlet entitled "Syndicalism" repeated many of these ideas, declaring that the General Strike was "purely speculative and dominated by the idea of Revolution. . . . It empties markets, it stifles consumption throughout the community . . . it hits the poor people hardest . . . the class that must surrender first is the poor. . . ."

In many articles and speeches and especially at the June 25, 1926, and January 20, 1927, Conferences of Union Executives which were called by the TUC to discuss the General Strike, right-wing leaders revealed their real attitudes to the General Strike as a weapon of struggle, and sought to justify their calling it off as a consequence.

Ramsay MacDonald in the House of Commons debate on May 3 said—"All my life I have been opposed to the sympathetic strike. It has no practical value, it has only one certain result—*a bitter and blinding reaction*". (My italics J.C.)

Again, in the *Socialist Review* of June 1926 he wrote:—

> "Everybody who knows the facts must come to one conclusion . . . the General Strike is a weapon that cannot be wielded for industrial purposes. It is clumsy and ineffectual. It has no goal which when reached can be regarded as victory. If fought to a finish as a strike it would ruin the trade unions and the *Government in the meantime would create a revolution*. . . . (my italics J.C.) So today some critics blame the General Council, some blame the miners. The real blame is with the General Strike itself and those who preached it . . . it was not (because of its nature it could not be) a help to the miners. . . ."

In the July issue of the same journal he added . . . "For the purpose of helping the miners the strike could not be more successful than it was unless the leaders were willing to lead it over the borders of revolution and this they rightly refused to do".

C. T. Cramp (Railwaymens' leader) said at the 1927 Conference—"I submit that . . . we cannot have a General Strike without hitting your own people first, and trying to carry it out to its logical

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conclusion means that you get absolutely nowhere".

J. T. Brownlie (Engineers' leader) said at the same Conference—"I am not in favour of a General Strike in trade union matters. I recognised that a General Strike on behalf of the miners or anyone else was doomed to fail from the very beginning".

Strangely, Otto Bauer, the leader of the "Austro-Marxists" wrote in almost exactly the same tone but giving it a 'marxist' gloss in the *Arbeiterzeitung*, the daily paper of the Austrian Social democrats on May 16, 1926:

> "The Communists and their supporters have been quick with their verdict 'The leaders betrayed the strike'. . . the world would have been a paradise long ago "if the leaders" had not been weaklings, cowards, traitors. Such views stem from a bourgeois idealist conception of history, while Marxism seeks the objective causes which, in this case, could only lead to this result. . . . The General Strike was hopeless from the very beginning. . . . It is much better to avoid a struggle the prospects of which are most unfavourable than to go foward to certain defeat.' "

The Two Lines on the Miners' Strike

As the result of the ending of the General Strike on May 13 the miners were left to battle on alone, and this they did for the best part of six months until November, when, as the result largely of hunger and their growing sense of being abandoned by the labour movement, they were driven back to work.

During the whole of this period the Party campaigned with all its forces to assist the miners by winning the labour movement for the policy of an embargo on the movement of foreign coal into this country and for a financial levy on other unions whose members had gone back to work. The carrying out of these two slogans was vital for any hope of victory for the miners. The free movement of coal imported from abroad into this country enabled the government to sit out the strike and wait for the miners to be driven back. The absence of a levy increased the difficulties of maintaining the strike and for providing sufficient food for the miners and their families.

The right-wing trade union leaders opposed both propositions—the embargo on the grounds that it would in practice mean the resumption of the General Strike, and the levy because they stated that their funds needed to be used to assist their own unemployed and victimised members. The Labour Party Conference in September 1926 discussed an executive resolution which did not even mention the General Strike nor the need for a levy or embargo but concentrated primarily on proposals to re-organise the mining industry. As David Kirkwood, in moving a resolution from the floor for a levy and the embargo said—"Was there anything in the resolution that would lead anyone to believe that the mining crisis was still in existence. . . . The miners were faced with starvation and yet this resolution did not say one solitary word that the great labour movement of Britain was coming to their rescue". The resolution on the embargo and levy was, however, rejected.

Some Problems

The whole question of the efficacy of a general strike, of the unacceptable level of suffering it would cause the workers and their families, of its relation to revolution and especially to what MacDonald in the above quotation called an inevitable "blinding reaction", brought confusion and some ambivalence in the minds of some British radicals and socialists about the calling off of the strike, even though they had supported it at the beginning.

Thus Bertrand Russell in *New Leader* (the then paper of the Independent Labour Party) May 21, 1926, wrote:

> ". . . the case in favour of the TUC is the pacifist case. If the strike had continued the country would have been faced with starvation. . . . There would have been riots and bloodshed. To this there would have been no answer but physical force.
>
> "[It is] therefore clear that a fight to a finish which would have meant the complete ruin of the nation. Every humane person who perceived this desired a settlement. The TUC . . . being less indifferent to humanity than the Government came to prefer a settlement to victory."

He recognised that this approach meant that "power must always remain in the hands of the wickedest people" and that if this is to be avoided "those who desire a better world are willing to resort to force in spite of the harm it may do for the time being".

H. N. Brailsford then editor of the *New Leader* wrote in the same issue:—"Much more serious was the failure to think out whether the General Strike is an appropriate weapon unless one intends in the event of success to attempt revolutionary action."

A number of confused and defeatist ideas run through all these statements. They can be summed up as stating that the mobilisation of all the forces of the working class in a General Strike in defence of the wages and working conditions of one section can never succeed, for the working class will suffer most, the struggle will lead to revolution which will only stimulate a "blinding reaction" on the part of the capitalists.

The logical implications of this approach are, in effect, that each section of the working class must defend its interests alone.

True, on occasion, such separate struggles may be

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successful but in a period of crisis, as in 1926 and as is much more the case today, they *cannot do so* as the heroic six-month struggle of the miners in 1926 proved. In the last analysis these statements are an argument for refusing to fight capitalist attacks because workers would suffer most. Further, this idea that the capitalists are all-powerful and that the workers can never defeat them means in the last analysis that the struggle for socialism is hopeless.

The fact of the matter is that the struggle to end capitalism and establish socialism does involve sacrifice, *but the continued existence of capitalism involves even more*. Those who declare that reformist socialism, the socialism of right-wing labour leaders, offers a painless if slow road to socialism have been proved wrong. The world situation today, the changed relation of class forces, however, makes possible an infinitely less painful advance to socialism than was possible for the Russian people in 1917.

The short answer to all the above quoted statements, however, is that in 1926 the struggle need not have resulted either in riots, bloodshed or hunger or in the defeat of the General Strike and consequently of the miners. The forces of the working class were increasing every day and there is every reason to believe that had the strike been continued and extended, better terms for the miners could have been secured and wholesale victimisation prevented.

True the state power was in the hands of the ruling class. True, likewise, that there were ultra-diehard elements in the Government (Joynson-Hicks, Churchill) who were trying to smash the trade unions once and for all. But there was a very great risk in any attempt to try and impose a military solution by the shooting of workers, especially as the majority of the soldiers came from working class families.

History shows that general strikes exhibit great variety in their aims and causes. Some are directly linked with a wide-ranging revolutionary process. Other general strikes have been inspired by the desire to improve wages and working conditions.

In 1926 in Britain the General Strike was not linked with any revolutionary mass struggle to overthrow the Government and change the social order. It was a massive class confrontation, a struggle both of solidarity with the miners and in defence of the wages and living conditions of all workers, in the course of which the authority and the policy of the government were challenged. But though some of the strike committees and councils of Action developed "the germs of alternative government", the subjective forces for advancing the struggle to the level of revolution did not exist. In this situation efforts by the government to crush the strike by armed force would have seriously weakened its position amongst wide sections of the British people. This they realised and while involving the armed forces on a big scale, especially in London, on convoy duties, they were careful not to begin "the bloodshed" and relied mainly on the police. Thus there is every reason to believe that given the correct, class leadership the General Strike could have succeeded without all the dire consequences mentioned in the statements quoted above.

Lessons of the General Strike

Although 50 years have passed, sections of the Thesis on the General Strike adopted by the Eighth Congress of our Party on October 16/17, 1926, bear repeating:

> "The impulse behind the capitalist offensive is the fact of capitalist decline which continues to make itself felt. Future mass strikes are inevitable if the workers desire to defend their standards. . . .
>
> "The principle lesson of the General Strike was that the class struggle has entered a new phase in which the efforts of the working class to defend itself must bring the working class movement into even sharper conflict with the capitalist class. . . .
>
> "The carrying out of these tasks must go hand in hand with the replacement of the existing leadership of the labour movement. A new leadership must break entirely with the right-wing policy and stand for a complete left-wing policy. . . . The new situation will raise in an acute form the question of the struggles of the labour movement against the capitalist state, for the socialist reconstruction of society. . . .
>
> "The victory of the British workers is bound up with the development of a strong Communist Party."

The situation is different and much more favourable for us today. The hold of the right wing on the labour movement, though still strong, is much weaker than it was in 1926. The trade unions are much more powerful and numerically strong and the influence of the left-wing and communist militants in them much greater. The Communist Party itself is much stronger and more experienced with a record and prestige in the labour movement much higher than it was in 1926.

The cardinal tasks of the day are to develop the unity of all the forces of the Left, to undertake a great offensive on the hold of capitalist and right-wing ideas over still large sections of the working class and to greatly strengthen the Communist Party, the Young Communist League and the circulation of the *Morning Star*.

In short, the major task is to strengthen the labour movement for the great battles ahead by working to supplement the deep sense of class solidarity, the dogged determination to struggle against attacks on wages and living standards, by increased political consciousness, a deeper understanding of the need to take part in the struggle to end capitalism and establish socialism.

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The Miners Fight On

George Short

(The author, like his father and grandfather, was a Durham miner. He started work in 1914 at the age of 14 years, and worked along with them for 12 years at the same pit. After a period of unemployment he changed to anhydrite miner at ICI Bellingham in 1929. During the General Strike he was a delegate to the Chopwell Council of Action and served with a "Flying Picket". He joined the Communist Party in May 1926, was elected to the National Executive Committee in 1929 and has held unbroken membership of the Party for 50 years. From 1930/60 he worked as a full-timer for the Party as District Secretary in Teesside. He retired in 1960 owing to ill-health. Like many others he served three months in prison during the unemployed struggles of the early 30s.)

The General Strike ended with bewildering suddenness. To those engaged in the struggle the order of the TUC to return to work came just as they felt they were getting on top. Indeed in the North-East we virtually controlled everything that moved. For example, on May 4 and 5 three officials of the Regional Council of Action agreed to meet the Civil Commissioner, Sir Kingsley Wood, together with his aides Sir Kerr Mongtomery and a Mr. Moon, to discuss the control of the unloading of food at the Newcastle Quayside. Sir Kingsley, one of the 12 virtual dictators appointed by Baldwin to control the various regions, was forced to accept this situation despite the appearance of two destroyers and a submarine in the Tyne.

At first the order to go back was regarded as a trick, "Government propaganda". Subsequently it was seen for what it was, a gross betrayal, not just of the miners, but of the rank and file of the entire trade union movement. Strange as it may seem, the miners, left to face alone the Government, mine-owners, Church, radio and press, showed not anger but deep concern for those who had supported them and were now trying to get back to work. Herbert Smith truly expressed the sentiments felt throughout the coalfields when he wrote:

> "At our conference, two days after the general strike had been declared off, the first thing we did was to express our heartfelt thanks to our fellow workers, who had so nobly come out in their millions in support of the miners. . . . As one of the working class I feel proud of what my class could do. As a miners' representative, I feel a tremendous debt of gratitude."

Age-long experience had taught the miners what would happen to their comrades of the General Strike. They were not mistaken, Railwaymen, dockers, transport workers and all who had been active in the Councils of Action were singled out for special treatment.

A Perilous Position

The unconditional ending of the General Strike left the miners in a perilous position. It was now no longer a fight to maintain their existing wage levels and prevent lengthening of the working day, it went much deeper than that. It was now a fight to retain and safeguard even a trade union of their own. The mineowners were in the forefront of those employers who saw the betrayal of the General Strike as a heaven sent opportunity to finish, once and for all, effective trade union organisation. The miners' solitary struggle became in effect a rearguard action which helped to alleviate the reprisals that the employers endeavoured to inflict on other sections of the working class.

Prior to the General Strike the coalowners made clear the conditions upon which the men would be allowed to work. Briefly these were:

(1) Introduction of a longer working day.
(2) An all round wage reduction.
(3) The end of national agreements and a return to the old pernicious practice of district agreements.

After May 12 the mineowners felt they were in a position to impose such conditions before allowing the miners to work. The miners, particularly in Durham, saw the lockout as an endeavour to wipe out every advance won by them and their parents before them. They felt they were defending gains secured by hardship and struggle from the days of the early binding strikes of the 1840s.

Battle-cry of the Struggle

The hardening of these two attitudes made certain a long and protracted struggle. In Durham the miners had already been well trained for such a fight by the guerilla methods practised by the coal-owners in the 1924-25 period. In this period, for example, companies like Priestmans and Consett Iron Company would present the men at one of their pits with an ultimatum. Either the men had to accept lower wages and worsening working conditions or on a given date the pit would close. The general lockout on May 1 was therefore seen either as a renewal, or even in some places, as a continuation of this brutal policy of the owners. However, this time it was officially backed by the Baldwin

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Government. It was not surprising, therefore, that the slogan echoed by A. J. Cook, General Secretary of the MFGB was:

> "Not a minute on the day,
> Not a penny off the pay."

This slogan became the battle-cry throughout the whole bitter seven months period. A. J. Cook was seen as the exact opposite of leaders like J. H. Thomas MP (expelled from Parliament in disgrace in the thirties). Cook became the symbol of the fight for "the Union". I remember on one occasion when A. J. Cook was to address a rally of miners at Burnhope, Co. Durham. Miners and their families came from every village in the Derwent and Wear valleys, in some cases walking 15 to 20 miles. He told the huge gathering the story of the age-long struggle of the miners against hardship and tragedy, of their right to live a decent life. He spoke of the way the fight was going in other parts of the country and the efforts being made to win support of workers in other lands, finally receiving ringing cheers in response to his demand for "Not a minute on the day not a penny off the pay".

Fight for Food

As the early days of the lockout grew into weeks many problems arose for the miners and their families. One of the over-riding problems was how to secure food. Social Security was a weapon not yet to be won for another quarter of a century. However, lessons learned in the earlier struggles came in useful. To quote Will Lawther (*Labour Monthly*, August 1926):

> "No area in the country is reaping the reward of Labour in power and using that power more than in Durham. We have of course that symptom in our midst the respectable person, but on the whole it is a correct statement of fact to state that the spirit of the adults has been kept up by the fact that the children were being fed through the Feeding of Necessitous School Childrens Act and by the Labour Board of Guardians."

In this connection Communist and Labour Party speakers alike brushed aside with contempt any talk of "stigma" or "disgrace" and urged people to make the fullest use of any help they could get either for their children with school meals or by appealing to the local Board of Guardians for assistance. Meagre as it was such aid helped in the fight against the Tory and coalowners' main weapon, hunger. To these efforts was added the daily soup kitchen organised by the miners themselves.

Another feature in this all-important fight for food was the part played by the Retail Societies of the Co-op movement. During the days of the actual General Strike the Co-op did not play a very big part. They were not represented on the local Councils of Action and seemed to be more concerned about the movement of supplies and their own problems. However, as supplies of cash for the miners became more scarce, arrangements were made through the Lodges for vouchers to be issued that could be cashed for food at the local Co-op store. Repayment for these vouchers was guaranteed by the Union. This arrangement was a tremendous help to the miners, who it must be said, repaid this credit from the Co-op Societies in full.

Soviet Solidarity

Every possible avenue was explored to secure aid. At every trade union conference the issue became a battle ground. The leaders of the MFGB made international appeals for help. From a score of countries money began to flow in. Chief of these were the miners of the USSR. Their first contribution was half a million pounds, which by October rose to nearly a million. This act of international solidarity aroused howls of near hysteria from both press and radio. "Moscow gold" they screamed. The Government sent a note of protest to the Government of the USSR, in which they complained of the transfer of money from the trade unions in Russia to a trade union in Britain. Even a debate in the House of Commons was staged on the subject of "Moscow gold" on June 26, 1926. Such ragings in no way intimidated the miners. In fact the action of the Russian miners aroused a warm feeling of solidarity, that even 40 years of constant and at times vitriolic anti-Soviet propaganda has been unable to dispel.

A simple and yet moving ceremony which took place 28 years after the lockout emphasises the continued existence of this feeling of solidarity. Then the village of Chopwell presented their Lodge Banner to the representative of the Soviet miners. In making the presentation James Hawkshaw, Chopwell Lodge President, said, "We present you with this Banner as a token of the close friendship between the miners of Britain and the miners of the Soviet Union". Today the Chopwell Banner, resplendent with its portraits of Marx, Lenin, and Keir Hardie, can be seen hanging in the Moscow Hall of Trade Unions.

The Soviet miners together with the MFGB issued a joint appeal for funds. Nationally Marion Phillips, leader of the Labour Women worked hard to raise funds. She used a miniature of a miner's lamp which was sold or auctioned wherever a meeting in support of the miners was held.

In the early stages of the lockout great store was set on securing an embargo on the movement of coal by railwaymen and dockers. But these had their own problems. Ordered back to work unconditionally by their leaders thousands of railwaymen

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Miners' Lockout in South Wales: the "Glynneath Soviet Level"—co-operative mining to aid the families of the strikers (South Wales Miners' Library)

A. J. Cook (Welsh Miners' secretary) with William Paul, editor of the "Sunday Worker"

were told "sorry we have no work for you at present". The leaders of the railwaymen used this situation to argue why an embargo could not be placed on the movement of imported coal to power stations etc. Unlike 1972 the miners themselves made no attempt to establish power station pickets.

Baldwin Government Attacks

At every stage during the lockout the Baldwin Government made every effort possible to ensure the defeat of the miners. By July 8 they had rushed through the House of Commons the Coal Mines Act of 1926. The purpose of this act was to legalise the lengthening of the working day underground to eight hours plus winding time. This meant the hard won seven hour day underground being extended by one and a half hours. Furthermore, the promise that wages should not be allowed to sink lower than a subsistence level of 45 shillings per week was also discarded.

The strain of such a struggle was beginning to tell on the rest of the population as well as the miners. An effort was made by the churches to intervene with the intention of bringing the struggle to an end. A set of proposals which became known as the "Bishops' Memorandum" were put forward. These in the main called for an immediate resumption of work on the terms prevailing prior to April 30. This was to be on the basis of a government subsidy to the coalowners. Negotiations could then take place along the lines of less wages and a longer working day. The Miners' Executive were prepared to support such a move, but the Government made it plain, no subsidy. Despite the attitude of the executive the Bishops' Memorandum was hotly debated in the coalfields and eventually rejected by a district vote.

Women in the Coalfields

An outstanding feature of this long struggle was the part played by the women in the coalfields. Prior to 1926 the philosophy had generally been one of "the men must work whilst the women must weep". However, during the lockout the women really came into the picture. In Durham they played a part in the fight for school meals and took part in the picketing and the discouraging of "blacklegs". For example, in one village the vicar's son, inspired by a strong feeling of "patriotism," had volunteered to work in the pit. This much-published event was carried out under heavy police guard. A strong body of miners' wives assembled near the entrance to the pit yard. They did not boo, or make any attempt to interfere with the blackleg or his bodyguard. They merely surrounded them and moved off, very slowly, up the narrow road leading to the vicarage, singing with all the dignity of a funeral procession, such hymns as "Abide with me", "Rock of Ages" and "Lead Kindly Light". As if by magic, a wreath

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appeared, borrowed from a recent grave in the nearby cemetery. This was placed around the neck of the "would-be miner". This experience destroyed any desire on the part of the vicar's son to become a miner.

Also in Durham a new type of meeting developed inaugurated by Communist Party comrades like Isobel Brown, Majorie Pollitt, Beth Turner, Lily Webb and others. For these meetings a woman speaker would visit a village and go from street to street, giving reports on how the struggle was going and calling for solidarity with the menfolk. The development of such meetings on occasions was amazing. Starting in a small way they would gather strength street by street, until finally they finished in a powerful demonstration.

Communist Party's Contribution

The Communist Party made a powerful and positive contribution to the miners' fight. To understand this fully it is necessary to look at the Party itself. As a political force it was still in its early formative years. It came into existence following the Unity Conference of Marxist and militant groups in August 1920. It was born in a period of revolutionary upheaval that swept the entire Western world.

When the Tory Government in 1925 threw down its challenge to the entire Labour movement, with Stanley Baldwin's notorious demand that "the wages of all workers must come down", the Communist Party was still mainly a propaganda organisation, with its own weekly paper, *Workers' Weekly*. Encouraged by the 1924 decision of the Labour Party to exclude the Communist Party from membership, the government instigated a raid on the Party headquarters. Twelve leading members were arrested and sent to prison, some for twelve and some for six months on a charge of sedition. This was the situation the party faced on the eve of the sharpest and most formidable offensive the working class had ever been called upon to meet. One of these Communist leaders, R. Page Arnot, fresh from jail, came to the North-East a few days prior to the commencement of the miners' lockout. It was upon his initiative and leadership that the powerful North-East Councils of Action Movement developed.

Communists in the North-East

Following the betrayal of the General Strike, the Communists were in the forefront of the movement to rally and maintain the unity of the miners and their families. Also, they endeavoured to win support for them from the ranks of other hard pressed workers. The Party membership had been greatly increased as a result of its work before and during the general strike. In the North-East C. R. Woods, himself an unemployed miner, and who in later years did yeoman service for the miners in Northumberland, was responsible for the propaganda work of the Tyneside Communist Party. He pressed into service everyone capable of making a statement in public. The new starters received their "baptism" in Newcastle—at the Quayside on a Sunday morning and in the Big Market on the night. With others more capable they were then sent into the mining villages. With this team of 20 to 30 speakers, meetings were arranged every week in the maximum number of villages in both Northumberland and Durham. Great care was taken to ensure these meetings never conflicted with, but were always complementary to, the efforts of the local miners' Lodge. In this way they became an additional aid to developing the class solidarity of the miners and their families. Most of the speakers became experts on Poor Law and school meal problems. Such expertise was to stand them in good stead later in the thirties.

In the discussion that raged around the Bishops' Memorandum the Communists played an active part in securing its rejection. Mainly miners themselves, the Communists by their unstinted work and class loyalty helped the miners of Britain to write one of the most glorious pages of British working class history.

Attempts to Split the Miners' Union

It is an everlasting tribute to the miners and their wives that even in the darkest hours of 1926 no power in the land could successfully drive a wedge between them and their union. Something that was difficult to understand in 1974 was the union official of the AUEW who took his union into the law courts to overturn a decision of the National leadership. Amongst the miners of 1926 such a course would have been unthinkable.

There were, of course, efforts made to divide and defeat the miners. The most outstanding of these was led by the Nottinghamshire leader George Spencer MP. He arranged for a return to work for the men of the Digby Pit in October. He was promptly expelled from the Miners' Union. At the October conference that discussed his conduct he was ordered to leave the conference. But first in the Nottinghamshire district, then in other parts of the country efforts were made to get a foothold for what became known as Spencer's "Non-Political Union".

It was alleged they had strong financial support from Havelock Wilson's National Union of Seamen. The choice of Chopwell Colliery as a point of concentration for a possible breakthrough in Durham was an unfortunate one for the "Non-Pols". Here the pit had stood idle for 18 months prior to the National Lockout. Attempts to maintain safety measures in the pit had only been possible with the help of a few colliery officials. These officials were

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kept under strong police guard in what was known in the village as "the compound".

Spencerism Defeated

On the day of the "Non-Pols" meeting in the Kings Picture Hall, the Chopwell miners turned out in force. When the chairman rose to speak uproar broke out. This continued for a time. As it died away the chairman tried again but the roar rose to a crescendo. At the next lull Jack Gilliland, president of the miners Lodge and delegate to the Durham Miners Association stood up on his seat. You could have heard a pin drop as he spoke. He finished by asking everyone present to leave the cinema and treat the "Non-Pols" with contempt. Quietly and in orderly fashion the hall emptied, except for the platform and a few colliery officials. Attempts in other villages met with a similar fate. It took ten years to uproot the weed of Spencerism in Nottinghamshire, but in Durham it never flourished. Despite all the difficulties the DMA, "the Union" as it was known, remained sacred in the eyes of the Durham miners.

Honoured by Gaol

Another important feature of the struggle was the way in which the forces of the state were used to assist the coalowners. The Emergency Powers Act, brought into use at the beginning of the General Strike continued in use during the whole of the lockout. Throughout the country the miners bore the brunt of this powerful weapon. On the slightest pretext men were arrested. Going to prison ceased to be a matter of shame or disgrace. Some of the best sons of the miners were singled out for such treatment. They became not "jailbirds but working class heroes. The police were used in a way that revived memories of the experiences told by Fynes in his earlier *History of the Northumberland and Durham Miners*. The police created for themselves an image Ted Willis and "Dixon of Dock Green" can never wipe out.

Why the Return to Work?

There was of course a limit to human endurance. To all intents and purposes the miners stood alone after six months of bitter struggle. Four things made this point very clear:

(1) Failure through the TUC to secure an embargo on the movement of imported coal. The miners had been asking for this ever since the collapse of the General Strike. During this period imported coal had grown in volume from 600,000 tons in June to the staggering total of four million tons in October. The total average weekly output prior to the lockout was only approximately five million tons.

(2) The disgraceful statement made by Robert Williams in his presidential address to the annual Labour Party conference at Scarborough. His view was that the miners were not engaged in a rearguard action against the most powerful offensive ever mounted against the working class. To Williams, himself a former left-winger, the miners were, "A sightless Samson feeling for a grip on the pillars, the crashing of which will engulf this thing we call British Civilisation". Ironically, this is still the same swan song right-wing social democracy sings 50 years later, whenever workers try to defend themselves against attempts to reduce their standard of living. Harry Pollitt then a delegate representing the Boilermakers' Society, together with David Kirwood MP made an unsuccessful attempt to get that crucial conference to repudiate the gross slander of Williams.

(3) The attitude of Baldwin's Tory Government, with its unashamed support of everything the coalowners stood for. An attitude revealed in the statement made by Baldwin to the United States on the arrival of a miners' delegation there seeking financial support:

> "No miner's child is suffering here".

(4) Finally, the breakaways, particularly those instigated by Spencer in the Nottinghamshire coalfield, were grievous blows against the miners.

Defeated but not Demoralised

But even in the hour of defeat the miners were not demoralised. At the end of November, when with agreement on the terms offered it was left to the various districts to make arrangements for the resumption of work, the Yorkshire, South Wales and Durham districts were reluctant to give in. Indeed, in Durham a ballot of the men showed a majority in favour of continuing the struggle against the harsh terms laid down by the Durham Coal owners for ending the lockout.

In view of the fact, however, that the ballot failed to give the necessary two-thirds majority in favour of continuing the fight, the Durham miners accepted the decision of the County Federation Board and the lodges were instructed to seek arrangements for the opening of the pits. The miners of Durham were the last to capitualate.

Victimisation

One of the conditions imposed by the coalowners was that there could be no guarantee against victimisation. In the Northumberland and Durham coalfields the vicious hatred of the coalowners and their paid hacks in the colliery offices was revealed in almost every mining village in the two counties. Colliery managers made it clear that they intended to play God Almighty, taking full advantage of the condition the pit was in after a seven months stoppage. They adopted the general formula that men would be taken on when conditions permitted

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and when they were required by the colliery. Further, there could be no question of "cavils" (lots being drawn to decide who should start first). The colliery manager alone should decide who would and who would not resume work. It must be said that in this respect the colliery managers made no distinction between Communist and non-Communist miners. Everyone who had played even a modest part in the struggle locally was seen by the colliery office as either a Communist or as a potential Communist and bluntly told "there is no work for you here".

What happened at the Durham pit Bewicke Main was typical throughout the coalfield. Ned Cowen, an old socialist, with a reputation as a fighter against poor wages and bad conditions, one whom anyone could take their troubles to and get help and advice, related what happened at the pit when the deputation from the men went to the colliery offices to arrange for a resumption of work:

> "We presented ourselves cap in hand at the colliery office. I was the one who went cap in hand expecting the management to arrange for us to restart work. When the manager came he said to me, 'You are not allowed in this yard, off the premises.' When we sought to have cavils for who should start he said, 'Out of this office. I am running this pit'."

Ned Cowen was one of the last men to be taken on at Bewicke Main Colliery. He, like many others got back into the pit only because Peter Lee had managed to get an agreement at County level which said no pit could employ "strangers" whilst any of their old employees remained idle. Ned was really one of the few lucky ones. Some men never got a start again at the old pit. The fact that pits had stood idle for seven months and could not resume full production immediately presented the coalowners with a heaven-sent opportunity to wreak their full vengeance on the most outstanding local leaders. At the same time they could weed out, without compensation, those who because of advancing age could no longer keep pace with the younger piece-workers.

After months of idleness and frustration many of the miners, particularly the younger men quietly left the Durham coalfield to seek jobs in other mining areas where they were not known. From late 1927 and 1928 the Yorkshire and Kent coalfields became known as places where a man could get a start without too many questions being asked. Many of these exiles from Durham began again to make their contribution towards the struggle of the miners. Eddie Lawther who left Chopwell and later became a prominent miners' leader in Kent was a case in point.

Then and Now

Only those who lived through those stormy days and who had heard their parents and grandparents relate their earlier experiences of struggles between "masters and men" can really understand and appreciate how it was possible for men and women to hold out for seven long months with the full force and might of the state, its press, church and police mobilised to encompass their defeat.

I stood on the Old Racecourse of Durham City on Gala day 1975, 49 years after and listened to Harold Wilson, the Prime Minister of the day, making his appeal to the sons and grandsons of those people of 1926: "Give a year for Britain, a year of restraint and sacrifice", he urged. Around the field in which he stood were the banners of the mining villages still working. Five of them were draped with black silk, indicating that in the past year men at the pit had simply sacrificed not just a year, but their lives for Britain. What a tragedy to hear these so-called leaders trading on the class loyalties of the present-day miners and in reality preaching the same gospel as Baldwin preached in 1925-26, i.e. "The wages of all workers must come down". All in order, if I may paraphrase Bob Williams, to maintain class and privilege and keep things as they are for now and evermore.

Now, as then, however, such calculations will prove unsound. In 1972 the miners once again stepped into the forefront of the working class struggle and on that occasion wiped out some of the defeat suffered in 1926. In 1975 at their Scarborough Conference they raised the demand for the £100 per week for face-workers. With this militant demand firmly before them, they once again step into the vanguard of working-class struggle. All the efforts and guile of those who hesitate and stand in the way will be needed to turn the miners away from the advance towards a better standard of living.

It is a fight which is leading the miners to take their place in the front ranks of those who will eventually ensure the fulfilment of that task which history is placing on the shoulders of the working people, namely turning the entire Labour Movement onto the path of the *British Road to Socialism*. If the events of the early seventies are any guide the British miners, in the coming period, true to the traditions of their forefathers, will not be found wanting in this ultimate struggle.

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